SPANISH ACRES

HAL G. EVARTS

UNIVERSITY
OF THE PACIFIC
Stockton, California
95204

WITHDRAWN

1851

Gift of

Mrs. Harry Noyes Pratt

Harry Hayes Pratt

With best regards

Hal G. Evarts.

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2025

https://archive.org/details/bwb_S0-ASR-680

SPANISH ACRES

By Hal G. Evarts

The Cross Pull
The Passing of the Old West
The Bald Face: and Other Animal Stories
The Settling of the Sage
Fur Sign
Tumbleweeds
Spanish Acres

SPANISH ACRES

By
HAL G. EVARTS

BOSTON
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY
1925

LIBRARY
NOV 17 1965
UNIVERSITY OF THE PACIFIC
142837
Western
Americana
PS
3500
E92
S7

Copyright, 1925,
By Hal G. Evarts.

All rights reserved
Published August, 1925

Printed in the United States of America

SPANISH ACRES

SPANISH ACRES

NIGHTLONG, with maddening monotonous rhythm, the skin drums of Tasao throbbed from the desert hills above the Valley of Springs. Perhaps the shades of departed generations of Castinados, of Porter, Cates and all those others, bowed an ironical welcome to Briggs. And down in the valley the 'dobe buildings of Pueblo Tasao were untenanted save by the mortal remains of this latest owner of Spanish Acres, who sat in his chair before the portals of his mansion, staring down into the deserted village with unseeing eyes while the hot sun dried and mummified his frame. Sand eddied through the lanes and drifted in open doorways of the 'dobe structures. Pueblo Tasao became the haunt of bats and lizards.

I

When the great Southwest became a part of the Union through the medium of the Mexican War, the United States Government, by Act of Congress, guaranteed the property rights of those who had enjoyed landed interests under the Mexican régime, provided only that they should appear in court within five years and show formal proof of title. Many an ancient paper, yellowed with age, was brought forth from strong boxes, letters from long-dead governors, proffering tracts of land in return for favors military, political, religious or otherwise.

Land was deemed to have little or no value, but it was considered highly desirable to have the good will of the inhabitants, so the benevolent power that had now superseded Mexican authority granted the most of these claims, whether or not they had ever been formally recognized by the Mexican Government.

The Castinado estate, a vast tract forty miles by sixty in extent, was formally conveyed to the

head of the Castinado family by patent. Not long thereafter, a matter of perhaps a dozen years, it came into the hands of an American, one Allan Porter, through his marriage to the only daughter of the household and the subsequent disappearance of both the elder Castinado and his son.

Thereafter Porter held sway over the great inland empire that had thus come under his jurisdiction, ruling with a hand of iron, his authority unquestioned, since organized law was yet a thousand miles away. He made his own laws and enforced them, imposing his will on the whole countryside.

The Texans, intent upon increasing their holdings, pushed westward with their cows, invading new territory. Every sizable outfit retained a crew of fighting men whose duty it was to hold off all marauders. These men had warred to the border and beyond it, following Mexican, Kiowa, and Comanche raiders that had made off with stock, plundering the marauders' herds in return, both by way of reprisal and for profit. These big Texas outfits pushed on and occupied the Canadian and the Cimarron, the broad flat

reaches of the Staked Plains. Their fighting men conquered such areas as each outfit desired by force of arms, and having conquered it, they proceeded to retain it in the same manner. It followed quite naturally, after holding it against the marauding Southwestern tribes that they should also defend it against rival cow outfits that would invade their range. From warring with Mexicans, Kiowas and Comanches these powder-burning veterans took to warring among themselves. It was said that the law would never come into these far places, and in all truth it took small cognizance of a man's relations with his neighbors. But eventually, as the country settled up, the law did come in. Little by little, county by county, it made its appearance, feebly at first, the initial efforts frequently futile and short-lived, but persevering until it held sway over another small area and pushed on to get its grip on the next beyond. It was then said that the law would never reach the Palo Verdes, and the process of stretching forth its arm to that far place was long delayed.

Porter's holding lay beyond the Palo Verdes, organized law still so distant that he gave not a

thought to it. It was his dream to establish himself as the undisputed overlord of the whole Rolavi Sink, extending east and west from Solado Arroya to Monab Wash and from the Palo Verde Mountains to the canyon of the Rio Tasao north and south.

It was still the fashion for cattle barons to traffic more or less openly in stolen cows. The old Mescalano Trail led up from the south and crossed the canyon of the Rio Tasao, touching the Rolavi Sink just south of Sand Crawl, an expanse of shifting sands. It was at the head of this trail that Porter's agents had met marauding bands of Apaches and held traffic with them, furnishing them, in return for stolen stock, with arms, ammunition and other requisites that rendered possible their continued evasion of capture by cavalry expeditions.

Roving bands of hard-riding, quick-shooting gentry now used the Mescalano Trail over which to drive stock, stolen off to the south along the border or beyond it, into the Rolavi Sink, where Porter purchased it at a figure profitable both to the plunderers and to himself.

The Rolavi Sink was not adapted to heavy set-

tlement. Watered only by springs and such tanks as could be fashioned across draws by the cowmen, available home-ranch sites were few. One such was the Martinez Grant, a tract of some two hundred sections on Monab Wash at the extreme eastern tip of the Sink. A section or more of this tract was abundantly watered by a small stream that pitched down from the Palo Verdes and disappeared in the vast rent in the earth's crust that was Monab Wash. A similarly small area was available along Solado Arroya at the western extremity of the Sink, occupied by a few Mormon settlers during the Mormon migration.

The Martinez family, hating and fearing Porter, refused to sell their holdings, so he set out to dispossess them by fair means or foul.

Other restless, conquering cattle barons came pushing on across the tawny deserts with their cows. Tom Langford, a cowman of Porter's type, bought the Martinez Grant from those who would not sell to Porter.

Porter made overtures to buy it from this new owner, but made the mistake of prefacing his negotiations with the threat that he would put

Langford out of business in case he refused to sell.

And Tom Langford laughed.

" Hell," he said, " I'm wondering how you'll go about it. I came into this country to acquire that ground of yourn. You say it's forty mile by sixty? I'll have that little plot in my back yard before I'm through with you or see the last of the Langfords buried."

He almost made good on one point.

He came into the country with a son and an infant daughter, two brothers and two nephews. Before he was through with Porter he saw all of the Langfords buried save the daughter and the son.

" That goes for the Porters," the old warhorse of Rolavi countered. And he was right. He saw all three of his sons buried before he was through with Langford.

Porter hired a number of the hard-faced gentry who frequented the Mescalano Trail and made war upon the Langford outfit. Langford, old at the game himself, had brought his warriors with him. Each one set out with the notion to establish himself as the undisputed monarch

of the whole Rolavi Sink. Neither attained his end.

Customs changed, railroads pushed closer, ox-trains brought an ever-increasing swarm of restless humanity pushing westward. An abortive attempt to establish law and order in the Sink failed dismally, for the reason that the population of the Rolavi country was unanimous against such interference. A gold strike created a short-lived mining boom in the Palo Verdes. It died. But while customs changed, the tribe of Tasao Indians altered its mode of living not at all. Indians of the Pueblo type, they dwell in their little village as they had since before that day when Columbus set sail across the seas. They had seen the advent of the pioneering Spanish Fathers, the establishing of landed estates, grants from a centralized authority that was beyond their comprehension, yet before whose will they bowed; then the coming of the cowmen. But through it all no man had questioned their right to the village, centuries old, and the Valley of Springs which was their home.

This Valley of Springs, a little oasis touching upon one corner of the Castinado Grant, sup-

ported the population of Pueblo Tasao, a village of several hundred souls. The waters of the many springs, distributed throughout an area of perhaps one square mile, were conserved and spread through the ditches of a primitive but practical irrigation system and watered the patches of squashes, peppers, beans and corn, the tiny orchards of peaches, apples, pears, plums and other varieties of fruit upon which the tribe of Tasao subsisted.

Came the day of an occasional squatter, faring on in the wake of the cowmen, settling upon odd tracts wherever water was available, though such spots were pitifully few in this land of little water; but the squatters came; and the cattle barons, fighting to retain control of the open range, drove them forth when they elected to set their claim stakes and fence off some precious water hole.

Porter, his dreams of unlimited power curtailed by Langford's operations, conceived an idea that led to his making various investigations. Shortly thereafter a squatter erected his 'dobe hut just outside the boundaries of the Castinado Grant and within two hundred yards of

Pueblo Tasao. Porter, the imperious, pretended to fume at this effrontery, but made no move to evict the nester.

" He'd only be followed by some other," he explained. " We can't keep 'em off the range forever."

Tom Langford scorned this meek resignation; but since the squatter's cabin lay within gunshot of the old Castinado hacienda where Porter dwelt, joining Porter's holdings and fifty miles removed from Langford's, the latter did not make a move to evict the intruder. Later came one Jessup, an upstanding human with a wife and three hundred head of cows. He homesteaded halfway between the west line of the Castinado Grant and the habitat of the Mormon settlers on Solado Arroya at the western extremity of the Sink.

Porter, while harboring one squatter in his very dooryard, could not in all consistency move to evict another whose filing was thirty miles removed. Such a move would cause Langford, his enemy, to suspect the reasons for Porter's leniency in the case of William Owen, the squatter who resided near Pueblo Tasao. The half-sec-

tion filing made by Jessup, an area scantily watered by springs, was even farther removed from Langford's holdings, so he too failed to move against him. Jessup was permitted to remain. All such small fry could be dealt with later, after Porter and Langford had settled their own affairs.

William Owen traded a bit with the villagers and managed, no man knew how, to eke out an existence until such time as he could make final proof and secure patent to his claim. This was granted with small delay. Owen then conveyed title to Porter and disappeared.

Porter had long since dispensed with the few Mexican retainers that had served the Castinado family. He now decided to make another sweeping change of personnel and he informed the dwellers of Pueblo Tasao that he had no further desire to see them about and that they were to vanish within the week.

The people of Tasao, troubled and uncomprehending, refused to move. They sent a delegation of their hereditary priests to confer. Porter was adamant.

" But our people have dwelt here always," the

spokesmen protested. "Where would you have us go?"

"You can go to hell!" said Porter, and closed the interview.

When the people of Tasao refused to migrate from their ancestral holdings, Porter called upon the authorities to evict them.

The resulting litigation, famous in its day, raged through the courts for a period of years. Eventually it was ruled that the homestead laws must remain inviolate, no matter what the cost. More than three decades had elapsed since that Act of Congress wherein the property rights of inhabitants were guaranteed. The people of Tasao had failed to avail themselves of that five-year period of limitation, before the expiration of which they should have made proof of ownership. They had put it off for thirty-five years instead, and in the meanwhile a homestead patent had been issued; the title to the land in question then reconveyed, and the claimants had not even troubled to contest these transactions. However just their claims might seem, to allow them would be to establish a precedent that would shake the homestead laws to their very roots, opening the

way to all manner of claimants. Tasao must move.

The Government selected a large tract to the south, across the Rio Tasao. Lumber was freighted more than a hundred miles across the desert from the nearest sawmill and neat frame shacks were constructed in lieu of the adobe village they must leave behind. A troop of cavalry was sent in from the nearest fort to escort the exiles to their new holdings.

The people of Tasao asked for one day of grace, which request was granted by the commanding officer in charge of the bluecoats, and at sunset the tribal filed forth from the pueblo and took to the hills that overlooked their ancestral valley. Some of them failed to return at dawn. Later, their bodies were found on various eminences overlooking the Valley of Springs, where they had elected to die by their own hands rather than to move.

All that night a low weird chant and the throb of skin drums sounded from the hills. Hardened troopers swore fretfully at the appalling monotony of the sound and confessed to a creepy tingle along the spine. Cavalry horses stamped rest-

lessly. But Porter, grim and ruthless, sat on the veranda of the ranch house — sat unmoved while that hollow never-ending toom! toom! toom! toom! toom! toom! sounded steadily throughout the night as the tribe of Tasao invoked an everlasting curse upon every future owner of the Castinado Grant and Pueblo Tasao till the end of time. Still unmoved, he watched the procession of wretched exiles file across the hills at dawn under the escort of the bluecoats.

Within a fortnight Porter rode from the ranch and returned no more to the Castinado hacienda. His horse, a vicious brute at best, had done him to death on the desert, so the report was spread. And that night the skin drums of Tasao once more throbbed in the hills above the Valley of Springs.

II

Four Tasao horsemen threaded the sandrock breaks in the vast canyon of the Rio Tasao by way of the old Mescalano Trail and topped out in the southern edge of the Rolavi Sink. The regular Tasao crossing was some fifteen miles to the east and the Mescalano Trail had been used but little of late years, being known to but few whites.

Just north of them lay Sand Crawl, a twenty-mile expanse of blow-sand, so named from the impermanency of its topographical features. The sands shifted with every desert gale, one hill being whittled away as a new one formed. Crawl Sand was waterless and verdureless. Stock never penetrated this inhospitable area, so riders seldom visited it. The Tasaos, to reach the old Castinado hacienda and Pueblo Tasao, must make a long detour or cross through Sand Crawl. They elected to cross.

The blazing ball of the sun was reflected from the brassy sands with furious intensity. After

traveling for an hour through this flaming inferno, the Tasao who rode in the lead reined in his pony and lifted a hand to impose silence upon his companions. They listened. Then a scream, a piercing shriek of mortal agony, ripped through the heated silence.

One of the Tasaos assumed that it was some poor devil dying of thirst and would have ridden forward to his assistance, but the leader detained him, giving it as his conviction that the man had just met a violent end. Leaving the four ponies in the charge of one, the remaining three crawled to the crest of a sand wave just ahead and peered cautiously forth.

Three saddled horses stood at the far edge of a sand flat some two hundred yards away. One man held two of them. A second man was engaged at some task near the third horse. As the Tasaos watched, he stooped to pick up some object and inspected it before tossing it from him into the sand.

One of the Tasao ponies nickered and the scene beyond became one of swift activity. The man slashed the horse with his hat and made for his own mount, swung to the saddle and the two

riders left on the run, disappearing in the maze of sand hills.

The remaining horse sidled away from a dark object that seemed to drag from its left side. The Tasaos understood. Even a very gentle horse will strive to move away from some object that drags close beside it. The object follows and the horse speeds up and wheels away. That something still follows, evidently with sinister intent. The animal, seeking to escape, side-slashes the thing with its heels and stampedes, kicking as it runs. By the time the horse has reached a state of exhaustion, the object has been reduced to pulp or slit to ribbons by those slashing heels. The Tasaos watched. The horse, strangely enough, stood as if petrified, except that at intervals it side-stepped daintily away from the thing that dragged.

The Tasaos eventually rode across the flat and one of them whirled his reata and put his loop on the horse before it could gain headway. The dead man dragged by one foot from the left stirrup. His boot heel had been pried off with a knife and his foot had been thrust through the stirrup. The knife had been broken in the opera-

tion and it was this that the man had tossed from him into the sand.

Taking the back track of the three horses, the Tasaos studied the signs in the sands that revealed every track as clearly as if made in new snow. The victim had been riding between the two others. The one on his right had suddenly seized his gun and plucked it from its holster, apparently tossing it off into the sand, where the Tasaos found it some ten feet removed from the three lines of horse tracks. At the same instant the man who rode on his left had seized him and dragged him from the saddle, dismounting with his struggling victim as easily as a cat would carry a squirming kitten, and had crushed the life out of him as a python might crush the bones of a half-grown pig. The evidence revealed that the final moment had come when the killer had thrown his victim flat in the sand, placed a knee on his chest, while hands that possessed terrible strength had exerted an upward pull upon the prostrate form until the whole chest gave way between the opposing pressures.

White men, the Tasao leader reflected, seldom troubled to conceal the evidence of a killing.

They did it more or less openly. Why, then, should these two have taken such pains, when it was so simple a matter to shoot a man in the back? It was, of course, to make the killing appear accidental — as if the man's boot heel had come off while his horse was in a refractory mood and his foot had slipped through the stirrup. By the time some rider discovered the horse — far from the spot, since the animal would head out of these sands and make for its home range and water — the winds would have covered every track in Sand Crawl. There would be no bullet wound or knife mark on the body, only shattered bones. It mattered nothing to the Tasaos if these two wished to conceal the evidence of their deed. It merely roused their curiosity.

What did matter to them was the fact that the victim was one Gillfoyle, the most recent owner of the Castinado Grant and Pueblo Tasao, the fourth to meet a strange end since the tribe had been exiled from their ancestral home. This killing, then, must be an act of providence. The Red Gods still looked kindly upon their people, for the tribal curse was working with incredible proficiency. This would be a gala occasion for the

tribe of Tasao and one night very soon the drums would sound once more in the hills above the Valley of Springs.

The quartet elected to turn back at once. The killers might have waited beyond to determine who had intruded upon their privacy. They would think nothing of picking off four Tasaos from behind some sand hill. The Tasaos were never a wasteful people. There was no adequate reason why good equipment should rot in the sand when its owner had no further need of it. So they stripped saddle and bridle from the horse, the gun belt from the victim, and headed back into the south on the Mescalano Trail.

III

THE squat 'dobe buildings of Rolavi Wells were mainly of a tawny hue that blended well with the pervading tones of the landscape. Now they seemed to absorb a roseate tinge from the crimson flame of the sunset and so continued to merge with the general color scheme.

The place was laid out in a hollow square about the wells. Coulard's various establishments occupied one whole side of the square. The Golden Nugget, his barroom and gambling hall, stood at one corner. Coulard's Trading Store graced the corner at the far end of the block, these two pretentious establishments being connected by a long chain of 'dobe structures, each a room unto itself, that constituted the lodging facilities of Rolavi Wells. The two adjoining sides of the square were scatteringly occupied by the office, freight shed and corrals of the stage company, the Rolavi Livery and Boarding Barn, sundry other adobe structures, mostly untenanted since the collapse of the mining boom, a

Mexican eating place and a Mexican saloon, gambling and fandango hall. On the far side of the square two flat adobe dwellings stood apart. Three women, one white and two of Mexican extraction, sat on the porch of one. Perhaps thirty houses, chiefly tenanted by Mexicans, were scattered about the adjacent flats.

Behind the camp, well up on the barren flank of the Palo Verde Hills, were the ragged scars of former mining operations and the buildings of the Three Strike Mine, located on the one vein that had proved sufficiently rich to be worked at a moderate profit. Rude frame shacks, blistered and paintless, housed the score or so of miners.

A dusty, plodding figure, herding two burros before him, shuffled across the flats toward Rolavi Wells. His outfit was that of the typical desert rat. The handle of two miner's picks protruded rearward from one pack, one on either side to balance. A short-handled shovel showed atop the pack. A rifle was thrust beneath the lash rope of the second pack. The man seemed to sag a bit to one side as he walked, as if thrown slightly off center by the weight of a great single-action forty-five that swung from his right hip. A

typical member of the fraternity of wandering prospectors in appearance and outfit, even to the crown of his dilapidated hat, he was also typical of his clan in that his spirit was serene and untroubled. The despondent droop of his white mustache was contradicted by a pair of keen old blue eyes that peered forth humorously upon all the world.

Dad Whetzel sang as he shuffled along:

"A dead man's horse in the hills."

A rider, leading a saddled horse, overtook him and slowed his pace.

"Howdy, Farrel," Whetzel greeted. "Your party ain't come yet?"

"Any day now," Farrel prophesied. "I been meeting the stage every day for most a week. He'll be along. I left Alden camped with the outfit at a water hole ten mile east along the base of the hills."

Farrel too was a drifter, but of a different type. Some two weeks before he and the man to whom he referred as Alden had crossed in over the Palo Verde Mountains with a pack outfit. They waited for the arrival of a third mem-

ber before taking up their avowed occupation of trapping mustangs in the Rolavi Sink.

The dusty stage, at the end of its long run over the Palo Verdes from Quenemaro, rolled into Rolavi Wells and disgorged a single passenger. Farrel introduced the newcomer to old man Whetzel as Stanley Hollister.

"Told you he'd be along," Farrel announced triumphantly.

"Yep. Everything happens in time if you wait patient for it," the old desert rat stated philosophically.

"Dad, here, has been scratching round in the Sink for upwards of three months," Farrel explained. "He's acquainted with the past, present, family connections, antecedents, social standing and disposition of most every worth-while citizen of the Rolavi Sink. They'll a good many of 'em be in Coulard's to-night and he can tell us."

"There's only three big owners in the Sink," the old prospector stated. "They'll likely all be in to-night, planning round-up. Starts next week."

Later he pointed out each of the three men.

"The big fellow there — weighs over three hundred on the hoof, he does — is Doc Slaven, owner of the Cross T V. Man there beside him, one with the brindle whiskers, is Jessup of the J T. That's Langford of the Bar Z Bell over there at the wheel. Them's the three you'll be mainly int'rested in."

Hollister sized up these three owners of outfits operating in the Rolavi Sink. Their holdings he already knew. Art Langford had come into the Bar Z Bell, once the Martinez Grant, at the death of his father, old Tom Langford, a few years before. His cows, possibly totaling twenty thousand head, ranged all of that portion of the public domain between his own holdings and the eastern boundary of Spanish Acres, as the old Castinado Grant was locally known. Doc Slaven had bought out the few sections of land that had been settled by Mormons on Solada Arroya at the western extremity of the Sink, owning but little ground, yet running twenty thousand head of cows on the open range. Halfway between his place and the west boundary of Spanish Acres, though farther south by thirty miles, lay Jessup's place, a homesteaded half-sec-

tion of ground in a valley watered by a stream that headed in a goodly group of springs, only to dip underground, its moisture sucked up by the desert within a mile of its source. Jessup ranged perhaps four thousand head of cows. These were the only stockmen in the Sink. Between their holdings, and insulated by miles of open range, lay Spanish Acres, now deserted and in ill repute, an empire fallen into disuse. The cows of others ranged over its broad miles as they did over the public domain.

Jessup was a quiet, uncommunicative person. Langford, dark, tall and tremendously powerful, seemed gloomy and morose as Hollister observed him at his favorite pastime at the roulette wheel. Twice he heard him curse savagely as some big bet was swept in by the house-man.

Hollister turned his attention to Slaven. The man's vast bulk made the chair in which he sat seem frail and insecure by contrast. He overflowed it. He had tilted it back until his head reclined against the wall. His eyes seemed ever half-closed as if the man were wrapped in habitual lethargy, but occasionally they rolled open to their fullest extent as might the eyes of a sleepy

lion when roused from a nap. He rose to make a trip to the bar, lifting his weight with apparent effort. He dropped one arm across the shoulders of a man who stood facing the bar, the gesture seeming to be a mixture of friendliness and a desire to help support his sagging weight.

"Now that little posture of friendliness and affection is one I'd sure fight shy of if I'd ever had a cross word with Slaven," Whetzel volunteered. "That big sleepy-lookin' spider is always real wide awake. He appears slow, but he's quick as a panther and stronger 'n a pack-mule. If ever he'd clamp down on a man, inadvertent like, he'd squeeze out his vitals like you or me'd compress a tube of glue."

The old prospector kept up a running commentary and Hollister learned that Langford, a cowman from his boot soles up, had developed a mania for roulette and had lost vast sums, the total unknown, on Coulard's wheel in the past two years.

"There's a girl who is half-owner in the Bar Z Bell?" Hollister asked.

"Not her. Old Tom Langford was obsessed to own Spanish Acres and he preached it morn-

in', noon and night till it become the chief part of the boy's upbringing," Whetzel said. "His notion was in accord with the old man's. The girl was sure sick of war. So old Tom Langford fixed her up with a sum of cash and left the Bar Z Bell outright to the son as the one who would carry out the old man's aims to the bitter finish."

"Does she still live hereabouts?" Hollister inquired.

"Yes. She's been away considerable, off outside somewheres to school. She was raised motherless, like a boy, and she tracks round through this country regardless, bedding where night overtakes her."

Langford snarled surlily as the house-man swept in another heavy bet.

"He's an ill-grained critter when he's riled, and ready to debate the opposite side of any question, but real likable when he's not crossed, and mostly the folks hereabouts all like him," Whetzel said.

Hollister learned that the pudgy old fellow with the blurred, indistinct features was Judge Sloane, a relic of the mining boom, where he had

lost his small stake and lingered on, to accept food and drink from any who invited. The judge was ever profound and impressive.

A newcomer invited him to the bar and the Judge as promptly accepted. He touched glasses with his host, bowing.

" The most triflin' circumstance of life is a real ceremonious occasion for the Judge," Whetzel commented. " The party he's imbibing with, the pop-eyed gent with the yaller mustache, is Garcon, the Indian agent on the Tasao reservation down south of the canyon. He's a pompous acting coyote with less brains than either of my jennies. When he ain't up here drunk he's down there drunker. I can't look at them bulgin' eyes an' that radiant mustache without thinkin' of a cat that's just took one startled look at a dog and fluffed its tail."

The place began to fill up. Two buckboards rattled up to discharge groups of miners from the Three Strike. Riders from the various outfits left their ponies at the hitchrails and fraternized at the bar. All games were going full blast. The place seemed to be run in the free-and-easy manner of the old placer-camp resorts. When a

man was broke he played upon credit. Hollister commented upon this matter.

"Yes, Coulard is real generous and open-handed that away," the old desert rat assented. "If a man loses fifty or a hundred in cash he can go right on and drop a similar amount on credit before Coulard shuts him off. Of course, Coulard gets the cash, and all he's out in return for the credit is wear and tear on cards, dice an' the wheel. Son, are you anyways superstitious?"

"Not any to speak of," Hollister denied.

"Do you believe in curses?" Whetzel asked.

"I've heard some that was uttered so heartfelt as to carry conviction," said Hollister.

"I don't mean profanity, neither plain or embellished," Whetzel explained. "I was referring to a curse of the ha'nt variety — a spell that's laid on folks or places."

"Oh!" said Hollister. "That kind. As a general rule I'd say that if one of 'em worked it would maybe need outside support."

"Um," Whetzel assented. "Maybe then, not being superstitious you hold with coincidence."

"Unless it happens so frequent that it don't appear altogether spontaneous and haphazard,"

Hollister qualified. "But it can be manipulated."

"Curious chain of coincidences that's happened over Spanish Acres way since the Tasaos laid a curse on it," Whetzel said musingly. "Cates was the next owner of the grant after old Al Porter was drug to death by his horse. It wan't more 'n a year or two before Cates was found on the desert. He'd been bit by a rattler. In fact, he'd been over-bit, so to speak. Remarking general, lightning don't strike twict in the same place, as the proverb has it — or rattlers neither. It's almost a set rule for a man not to allow a rattler to bite him more than once at the same sitting; but Cates had been bit on both arms and one leg. Two dead rattlers alongside him. Odd he didn't get no further away, but died right off."

"Real strange," Hollister agreed.

"Well, anyway, the next owner is a fellow named Briggs," Whetzel continued. "A practical cowman, Briggs was, and he checks all this up to coincidence. After a year or two his stock started to dying off mysterious. It appears like he acquired a touch of the same malady himself

and set down on the front porch to die. What with all that had happened before, the place got a bad name, and it set idle for close on to a year, maybe more. No one would pay much of a price for it with every owner meeting a strange end, and the certainty of acquiring a first-rate feud with Langford and the enmity of the Tasaos as soon as the papers was signed. Directly a party named Gillfoyle turned up, saying he owned it. Coincidence overtook him, no one knows how, some three months back. He strayed off somewhere and failed to come back. Every time an owner of Spanish Acres has passed out, the Tasaos have sounded their drums in the hills above the dead village. What do you make of it all?"

"It does appear like somebody had maybe gone into partnership with coincidence," Hollister submitted.

"Don't it now!" Whetzel agreed. "It looks like that curse was doing business as a firm. Spanish Acres is a sizable tract of ground — twenty-four hundred sections of land in it."

Five men drifted in and grouped themselves at one end of the bar.

"There's Doc Slaven's warriors," Whetzel said. "All top hands, but real apt with their guns as well. Things wasn't any too quiet hereabouts when Slaven started up six or eight years ago, what with the Porters and Langfords at war and a band of Mexican guerillas making an occasional sashay up this way along Solado Arroya. He put on a fightin' crew for his own protection, and done right well at it. The Mexican marauders made their last raid right after that and failed to get back to their hang-out, wherever it was. Slaven constitutes what little law there is south of the Palo Verdes, by common consent of the populace. They call him sheriff, but really he ain't. Half the riders hereabouts live in the Sink because they can't live anywheres else, which is quite all right. Slaven's activities chiefly consist of discouraging the pastime of shooting up the town when the boys come in from the range. Coulard objected to the damage, so Slaven, by remonstrating a bit, sort of extinguished the practice. Cole Webber, there, is the Cross T V Foreman. Cotton Moss is next in rank."

Hollister sized up Slaven's chief retainers.

" Webber murders folks good-naturedly," the old desert rat said. " He's sort of quit practicing haphazard homicide now."

Coulard, the proprietor, moved continually behind the bar, dabbing at real or imaginary specks with a towel. He wore a pointed black beard, which he caressed at intervals, and his black eyes beamed cordially upon all who entered. He spoke little but heard everything as he prowled behind the bar.

Farrel wandered to the roulette wheel and Whetzel turned to Hollister.

" Well, that's about all I've picked up in three months," he said. " Is it helpful, or did you know all that before? "

" Not all — some of it," Hollister said.

Hollister presently sauntered over and accosted Jessup and Doc Slaven, introducing himself.

" I'm figuring to trap mustangs hereabouts, hearing there's a surplus of fuzztails in the Sink," he explained. " So if you find some of your water holes flagged or rag-fenced you'll know it's to keep mustangs from using that particular water and force 'em to slake their thirst else-

where — where I'll be waiting to receive 'em. Rag-fencing won't keep your cows from going in to water."

Jessup nodded.

"The more you catch the better. They're a nuisance in the Sink. Clean 'em up an' welcome."

Slaven assented without troubling to open his eyes.

"They're mowing down good grass that had better be fed into cows," he agreed.

At that moment Langford, at the wheel, gulped a drink that had been carried to him by the bartender. He cursed fretfully as the croupier raked the board clear of chips. The imperturbable house-man idly twirled the wheel and snapped the little ivory ball in the reverse direction. The moods of gamblers meant less than nothing to him. He had seen and heard much. It was only the game that mattered. He plucked a thousand-dollar stack of chips from the check rack and pushed them toward Langford. At that moment Slaven hailed him. Langford turned impatiently but joined the group in response to Slaven's signal.

"Well?" he demanded shortly.

"This here is Mr. Hollister," said Slaven; and Langford nodded. "He's a mustang hunter and we've just give our permission, Jessup and me, for him to ply his trade on the range and trap our water holes."

"Not mine," said Langford. "I don't want any bunch of Gypsy mustang peelers hazing fuzztails round amongst my cows and churning 'em up till they run all the fat off 'em."

"But your cows will be throwed up on the mountain for the summer inside a month," Hollister submitted.

"No difference, I don't give permission to trifle round after mustangs on my range," Langford declared with finality.

"I wasn't asking permission, I was just telling you," Hollister answered equably.

Langford had believed the interview terminated and was turning back toward the wheel, but he halted in mid-stride.

"Just what do you mean by that?" he demanded.

"That your range, as you call it, ain't your range at all, but public land that's as free to me

or to any man as it is to you," Hollister stated.

"It's always been my range by usage," Langford retorted. "What affair of yours is it to question?"

"Range apportionments between local outfits are interesting and convenient but noways binding," Hollister commented. "However, if it'll ruffle you to see me operating up your way, I'll confine myself to Spanish Acres and on west from there, just in the interest of peace and good will."

"My cows range Spanish Acres too, every foot of it," Langford asserted. "You can keep off there too."

"But I thought Spanish Acres was owned ground," Hollister submitted mildly.

"It is. But I've got an offer up to buy it from the estate and I'll consider the use of it mine until that offer is definitely turned down," said Langford. "So that ends that."

"On the contrary," Hollister amended. "It just starts that. I can't seem to get together with you, so I'll act separate — and hunt mustangs wherever it damned well suits me."

Slaven had heaved his great bulk forward

till the front legs of his chair rested on the floor.

"Having two jobs, so to speak, I'd rather act now in the capacity of sheriff and save myself a chore in the capacity of coroner a few minutes hence. You all might quit wrangling, just as a favor to me."

Slaven rose ponderously and drew Langford aside.

"Artie, yore acting up unreasonable," he said. "You and me has been friends for a long spell now. No bit of use to crowd this Hollister over nothing much at all and set him on the warpath. He's quiet, but a killer, that hombre. I could see it in his eye, once you got him riled."

"He needn't hold himself in leash on my account," Langford returned.

"Which I know all too well," Slaven answered. "But this whole thing is too triflin' to get yourself killed over. I wouldn't."

"No, neither would I," Langford agreed. "I someway didn't figure it would be me."

"Well — now you all forget it," Slaven advised.

Langford returned to his game.

Slaven draped one huge arm across Hollister's

shoulders, a gesture half of friendliness, half as a measure to help support his weight. Hollister could feel the sagging drag of the man's bulk, but the arm, limp though it was, betrayed a hint of limitless power.

"Don't mind Art," Slaven advised Hollister. "He's unreasonable by spells but nice enough when you catch him right."

"We didn't catch him just right, did we?" Hollister returned.

"Not exactly; I reckon I timed it wrong," said Slaven. "Anyway, don't cross him. Give him a month to get over this and he'll maybe forget it. He's headstrong, Langford is, and has to be handled careful."

"All right," said Hollister, "I'll handle him — careful."

Eventually the crowd thinned out. Langford and Jessup had departed. Hollister left with Farrel to ride out to the spot where Tommy Alden was camped with the outfit.

Slaven shifted his bulk in his chair, apparently just roused from a long period of slumber.

"There'll be trouble between them two," he predicted.

"What two?" Cole Webber, the Cross T V foreman, inquired.

"Langford and this horse hunter, Hollister," said Slaven.

"Then Langford had better walk soft," Webber observed. "This Hollister is a bad hombre to trifle with or I miss my guess — and I haven't missed many or I'd be among those absent."

"Langford will crowd him hard," Slaven prophesied. "He's turned terrible argumentative of late, Art has."

"He's picked the wrong man to debate with this time," Webber declared again.

"Um," Slaven mumbled doubtfully. "Maybe. But Langford is right previous himself. I expect he can extricate himself from anything he starts."

Webber laughed indulgently, but shook his head.

"My money is on the stranger," he insisted mildly.

Dad Whetzel had been nodding sleepily in his chair. Now he yawned and stretched, emitting a hearty chuckle.

"Difference of opinion is what makes betting

good," he said. "Is there only two horses entered in this race?"

"Meaning which?" Webber inquired.

"The more entries there is in a race the longer the odds agin some o' the contenders — with public interest centerin' round the favorites," said the old desert rat. "I always did favor a two-hoss race."

IV

A GIRL rode down a draw in the hills above Pueblo Tasao. A movement in the brush on an adjacent ride caught her eye. She started to ride toward the spot. A horse nickered and a mounted Tasao Indian appeared on the sky line.

She proceeded down into the Valley of Springs. A hawk screamed three times in the hills behind her. The three screaming notes sounded again, but from a different direction, as she reached the edge of the deserted village and traversed the narrow, crooked lanes between the adobe dwellings of Pueblo Tasao. Blown sand had banked in these deserted galleries and drifted into open doorways. A rattler writhed out of her path and retreated to a fissure at the base of an adobe wall. Darting, many-hued lizards scurried on all sides. A few weeds had reared their heads in the unused lanes and now stood as dry and dead as the village itself. A ghostly silence pervaded the spot, broken only when an occa-

sional grasshopper whirred aloft with a crackling flash of bright-colored wings or when some vagrant breeze stirred the dried skeletons of the weeds and rattled their brittle bones as if in warning to the intruder.

The girl assumed the rôle of a proprietress inquiring after the welfare of her tenants.

"Carlos; the wife is better to-day, I hear. Come up to the big house this evening and we'll send over a baked chicken for her," she greeted an imaginary retainer. Before the next gaping doorway she nodded casually in passing and reined in her horse before the next.

"Good morning, Teresa; and how are the little Garcias to-day?" she inquired. "Ten, I believe you have now, isn't it? Oh, yes, eleven, to be sure. I must send something down for the little one. Gomez! Miguel! You should be ashamed — two big boys like you teasing little Pedro. Stop it or I'll give the two of you no sweets when you bring the milk."

Her voice echoed flatly among the tenantless houses. She removed her hat and fanned herself as she sat looking out from between the last two houses of the village. Just beyond, on a

slight eminence overlooking the Pueblo, stood the rambling, commodious quarters that had housed generations of Castinados, now as deserted as the village itself.

"José!" the girl called sharply, preparing to ride on. "Stir yourself, you lazy rascal! Would you have me dismount and lower the bars myself? Stir yourself!"

"It was right thoughtless of me," a voice replied from somewhere close at hand. "My apologies."

A tall man stepped from the doorway of the house on the right and gravely went through the motions of lowering an imaginary set of bars, then stepped aside and signalled her to proceed.

"Only my name is Hollister — not José," he added, as if by way of an afterthought. "Stanley Hollister. José, the regular gatekeeper, seems to be off on his vacation."

She was momentarily disconcerted at thus being confronted by a living apparition in this village of the dead; nettled, too, that he should have secreted himself at the sound of her approach as if to spy upon her. The man was regarding her gravely. He noted the loosened

tawny coils of hair which she now concealed by replacing her sombrero, and he saw the storm signals flickering in the depths of the blue eyes that were looking steadily into his own. Their natural kindliness flooded back into them and she laughed, wondering how much of her make-believe he had overheard. Not much, she fancied.

"Oh!" she said. "Are you the mustang hunter? I'd heard, somewhere, that you were holding out over here." Then on the spur of the moment, "Maybe you'd like the job of catching a little mare of mine that joined out with the wild bunch while I was outside last winter. She's trailing with the mustangs somewhere in the Sink. I'm Sarah Lee Langford."

"If you'll outline her looks I'll make an effort to get her in for you," he offered.

She dismounted and stood facing him while she described the truant mare.

"She's not really worth much, as horses go, but she's tough and fast and I was attached to her," she explained. "I'll give you twenty-five dollars to catch her for me."

"You know that any branded horse I happen to catch goes to the owner," he remonstrated.

" So just why should I charge you a ridiculous figure to return your mare if I'd happen to trap her? "

" I know," she said. " But I wanted to make it worth your while to put in a little extra effort to get her in for me."

" If she's ranging Spanish Acres I'll have her in for you," he promised. " It's a long jaunt back to your place. Won't you ramble up to the house for a drink and a bite to eat before you start riding back? "

" I'm camped with Jessup and his wife at Clayhole Seep, six miles from here," she said, " but I will have a drink."

She walked with him up the slope toward the house, leading her horse.

" Tell me," she said. " How can you make more than wages trapping mustangs by yourself? "

" It's no big thing," he conceded. " Still, it can be worked so as to pay out right handsome where there's as many as there is ranging hereabouts. I might take on a partner. How would you like to throw in with me? "

" I might give you a shock by taking you up,"

she threatened. "Chasing mustangs has been my one greatest sport ever since I've been able to sit on a horse."

"That's what I knew," he said. "Our minds travel pretty much the same trails. We'd hit it off right well as partners."

"What makes you believe that our two minds are so companionable?" she inquired.

"I knew it right off," he asserted.

"Oh! Right away you knew," she mocked. "Wasn't that nice — to know for sure?"

Masculine admiration was no new thing to Sarah Lee. Since infancy she had been showered with it to the point of saturation. She was so conversant with every manner of masculine approach that she felt qualified to predict in advance whether a man would be blatant or shy, precipitate or dilatory, confident or timorous in his advances. Therefore she failed to palpitate to the novelty of it all and to hold her breath in delightful anticipation of what this tall stranger might say next. She knew perfectly well what he might say next unless she cut him short. So, by way of cutting him short, she dropped her gaze demurely, caught the tip of one forefinger

daintily between her teeth and favored him with a sidelong glance of appraisal.

"So you just felt that there was something about me?" she murmured.

She lifted her eyes and met his direct, smiling gaze. The sun wrinkles deepened at the corners of his eyes.

"Just like that," he assented. "Now anything I could tell you would be like reciting a page out of the first reader. Still, no male human ever minds speaking his piece. It's chiefly the answer that shrivels him — so if it's all the same to you, I won't insist that a verdict be rendered on my case this morning."

He was not going to be aggressive and overconfident after all, she reflected. Instead he was rather offhand, his remarks seeming more in the manner of impersonal comment.

"It came up just like this," he resumed. "Along early in the day I'm out in those low hills that skirt the big flat off to the west when mustangs begin to spurt past, going east. I rode in behind a cluster of yucca on a ridge where I could have a good view without being seen. For as far as I could see out across the flat the whole wild-

horse nation was on the wing and moving my way. Say! What a picture!"

The girl knew from his momentary preoccupation that he was visualizing the scene over again.

"I never glimpsed anything like it," he resumed presently. "Here they came, stretched out over a five-mile front. They went smoking right past on all sides and fanned on up the country, with others still coming on behind."

Again he was silent for a moment, reviewing the picture.

"Then I see a lone rider pounding along in the rear. I put my glasses on him to see who was trifling with my mustangs."

"And behold! It was me!" Sally chortled.

"Just who it was," he agreed. "You didn't come closer to me than a mile, but even at that distance I could someway just feel — and you'll have to admit that I'm a longer-range feeler than most; likely it don't hit the average man until you're up within a few hundred yards — that you was enjoying that panorama as much from one end as I was from the other. After watching you maneuver those ponies I knew right off that

you'd make a top hand in any outfit that was bent on capturing mustangs."

"Not a top hand," she denied. "But at least an appreciative spectator."

They entered the spacious living room of the old Castinado mansion. Tasao and Navajo rugs, blankets and rare old Mexican serapes adorned floors and walls. The shelves flanking the big fireplace were filled with books. It was much as John Gillfoyle had left it.

These personal effects of the departed owner recalled to the girl's mind the sinister history of the place since the Tasao curse had been laid upon it — prior even to that, back in the days when Porter, then a young man, had wed Delores Castinado, and the father and son of the household had disappeared so shortly thereafter. The place had been erected almost two centuries before and it had been constructed for defensive purposes as well as for comfortable home uses. The main house was flanked by wings of less pretentious quarters for house servants and personal retainers; beyond them stood the adobe structures erected originally to serve as barracks for the armed troops that the first few generations of

Castinados had been forced to maintain. There were barns, storehouses and corrals, the whole of them enclosed in a compound of some thirty acres and surrounded by a ten-foot adobe wall. Here the Castinados had been prepared to stand a long siege in case of attack. The big compound was watered by three springs, the overflow from which provided sufficient moisture for irrigating a garden. Ancient trees grew within the compound. The most of the West was still raw, the buildings garishly new, but here seemed a world apart, a bit of civilization ripened and mellowed by age, and bespeaking an ancient order of landed aristocracy.

"Dreams of empire," the girl said aloud. "That's what drives us on." She reviewed the urge for empire that had sent the original Castinado nobles to this far spot, then Porter and the others — each thirsting for more power and bent upon extending his domain. "And me too," she confessed. "I was born with the true Langford urge to own Spanish Acres myself."

Hollister entered with a gourd brimming with cold spring water.

"Sorry I only have water to offer you," he

apologized. "Most any time I could stake you to a drink of fresh milk; but Gomez and Miguel, the shiftless little warts, are a bit late about fetching it to-day. When they do come I'll certainly tell 'em aplenty about that raw deal they put up on poor little Pedro. There's Mother Garcia, with ten to look after — come to think, now, it's eleven — and those two boys carrying on thataway!"

"So you did hear!" she accused.

"Just in spots," he confessed.

"I was over here often before Mrs. Porter died and before there had been any serious results of the feud between the Langfords and Porters. I was quite small and I'd play make-believe, imagining myself the patroness of Castinado hacienda and the Pueblo Tasao — Lady Bountiful distributing largess among all my hundreds of adoring retainers; and ironing out all their troubles. It comes back to me, somehow, whenever I ride over, and I carry on that way just to keep from being lonely at seeing it standing all dead and deserted." It came to her that she was revealing too much of herself and that she would dislike Hollister most cordially if he failed to un-

derstand. "But it's rather silly at my age, don't you think?"

"Perhaps," he said; "and at mine. Still, folks have to keep some sort of promised land dangling before their eyes or life goes flat and stale. We never quite attain the end of the rainbow. That's what keeps us going. Whenever one ambition or ideal gets tarnished or turns out to be a mirage, why we've got to cast around for some new cloud to hitch our kite to; don't you reckon?"

"Always just around the bend or over the next divide," she agreed.

"Now if our cases had been reversed — you under cover inside and me prowling through the pueblo — you'd likely have heard me communing with the villagers myself, laying out the day's work for three hundred odd henchmen and starting things to humming like a beehive."

"Not really!" she said.

"Solemn truth," he affirmed. "That's another reason I thought our minds followed similar trails. I had been setting there and picturing things hereabouts as they once was and ought to be again; the village lanes peopled with sprawling youngsters, wrinkled old squaws basking in

the sun, the houses adorned with strings of dried meat and festoons of red peppers, the flat roofs of those 'dobes piled with squashes and dried corn — all colorful and come to life again." He hesitated for a moment. "And, of course, with me sitting ahold of the reins," he added.

"And why not?" she came to his defense. "It's your own make-believe so why appoint some one else to manage it?" she laughed softly, moving to the window to look down upon the deserted village. "It's the urge for empire that moves us all. I'll never own all the broad miles of Spanish Acres, but I'm still infant enough to picture myself in that rôle, with the village repopulated and everything moving in the grand fashion of the old days of the Castinados."

"And me," he agreed. "So why not do it? Let's weave the story of the good fairy and the mustang hunter. The good fairy lays down the rules and the mustang hunter acts as the humble instrument that puts the miracle into effect. Suppose you start reciting the rules so we can get busy right off."

"Well," she pondered. "First the mustang hunter must acquire Spanish Acres so it will be

in good hands. It must be acquired by peaceful methods because the good fairy is very, very tired of war and strife and the criminal futility of men killing each other." For a moment her eyes turned somber, as if they regarded long-past scenes that were not to her liking. Then her natural buoyancy returned. "Next," counting on her fingers, "he must operate a big outfit here as in the days of the Castinados. And lastly, the village must be repopulated to the point where three hundred souls are living there."

"A pretty little tale like that always ends up by the benevolent conspirators sharing rewards forever after," he said. "When the mustang hunter achieves all these brave things, the good fairy will take on a full partnership?"

"Oh, absolutely!" she bantered. "It's a contract."

He pondered for space that was just sufficient to lend weight to his next utterance.

"It's a right sizable order," he said. "I'll take it on. Remember — it's a contract."

He spoke in an offhand vein but she surprised a look in his eyes that was not in accord with his casual utterance. Her own gaze dropped and

she had a sudden apprehension lest he should be too precipitate and spoil a promising comradeship. The apprehension, at least, was new to her experience, if the situation itself was not. The facetious word with which she was usually so adept in deflecting such issues failed her now. Instead, for a space of five seconds, moments freighted with possibilities, she found herself quite speechless. Then she sensed that he had turned his eyes from her and was once more looking out of the window. It occurred to her that there was a certain quality of understanding and kindliness about him. Kindliness; it was that strain in him that appealed to her, who had known so many hard, ruthless men. She dropped a friendly hand on his arm as he turned back from the window.

"I must be wandering on back to camp now," she announced. "The Jessups will be thinking I'm lost."

He knew that the Jessups would not worry. This girl had run through the Rolavi Sink since infancy, as wild and free as a range colt. He would have liked to prolong the visit, but he made no protest at this early departure, walking

with her toward her horse, the animal having sidled a hundred yards down the slope. When they had covered perhaps half the distance in silence she halted suddenly, one hand lifted to her breast in a gesture of fright. Her eyes, as she turned them to him, were wide with horror.

"Snake!" she breathed.

A rattler held the trail some six feet before her.

"So it is," said Hollister. "Romping round these parts since infancy, like you have, it must have handed you a perfectly frightful shock to encounter a twelve-inch rattler. Shall I step on it or will you?"

He smiled in answer to the deepening spark of mischief in her eyes.

"Let it live," she decided; "since you flatly refuse to rescue me."

"I'd love to perform a rescue," he said. "If only the blasted thing had been a mouse, now, I'd have shot it and extricated you from a real nasty encounter."

V

The flickering rays of Hollister's night fire cast fitful shadows on the scattered junipers. The sleeping, blanket-swathed form near the fire had not stirred. It was a night of dead calm. Tiny rustlings occurred in the brush, shrill trilling sounds; insects perhaps — small things. Suddenly, from back in the hills beyond the rim rocks of the gulch that sheltered the camp, an owl hooted — one note, a pause, then three more. A horse near the camp inhaled deeply as if testing the wind, expelling the breath with a whistling snort. The owl hooted its summons again. Presently the horse nickered. The blanketed form twitched, but very slightly, as if the sleeper had merely shifted an arm. The silence deepened. A tiny stone slid from the sandrock rims and rattled to the floor of the gulch. The blanketed form stirred again, and with the movement a rifle shot roared from the rim near the point from which the rock had been loosened. The im-

pact of the heavy ball struck a spurt of dust from the blankets and the huddled mass twitched, seeming to flatten beneath the bedding. The rifle spoke again, the sound tossed from wall to wall of the gulch in waves of accumulating intensity.

The rifleman, standing at the very edge of the rims, was held in silhouette against the sky. There was a third report, this time from the floor of the gulch, and a red streak of flame spurted skyward from the depths of a thick cluster of juniper some little distance from the fire. The figure on the rims straightened suddenly from its crouching posture. The rifle slipped from nerveless fingers and clattered down the rocks. Sagging loosely, the figure collapsed, pitching forward, and a moment later there came the sound of a heavy body striking soddenly on the rock rubble at the base of the wall. There was a momentary clattering of dislodged rocks, then complete silence. Even the tiny rustlings had ceased, as if the small things of the night had suspended their activities to listen.

Presently there was a movement in the thick clump of junipers.

"I reckon that will be all of it," Farrel's voice stated. "I bored him center."

"Yes," Hollister answered. "Dead center. We might as well saunter over and see who our visitor used to be."

Some moments later a match flickered and in its light the two men inspected the sprawled figure at the base of the sandrock bluff.

Neither of them could recall having seen the man before.

"Owls," said Farrel, sententiously. "Owls come in handy."

"Don't they!" Hollister agreed.

"Some one," Farrel conjectured, "has been looking you up and slipped in behind your disguise. Now who, do you surmise?"

Hollister shook his head.

"I'm dead set against making rash guesses. Some day we'll know for sure. But I see it's still the fashion south of the Palo Verdes to hire your man killed without wasting time."

A third man, Tommy Alden, appeared from the gloom.

"We'd better inter him before sunup and fail to remark about this little episode," Hollister de-

cided. " One of you go up and unsaddle his horse and throw it loose on the range."

Just at dawn an early-rising raven set up a raucous cawing in the choppy hills beyond the rims above the water-hole. Shortly thereafter two burros appeared on the rims, their long ears flopping in silhouette against the graying sky. Various mustang trails led down through breaks in the sandrock rims. Hollister had blocked these routes by wedging dead junipers in the crevices. The floor of the gulch itself had been walled off at the narrowest part. Thus a substantial corral of some six or eight acres in extent had been fashioned round the water-hole, serving as an enclosure in which the horses might be safely confined overnight.

The old prospector removed the obstruction from a crevice through which a trail led down to the bottoms, and prodded his two burros toward the camp.

Hollister, just smoothing the embers of the fire preparatory to cooking breakfast over the coals, invited Whetzel to eat.

" Thanks, but I fed an hour before sunup and headed this way," he declined. " I was camped

at a spring, just a stray seep in a little blind pocket something over a mile from here, and got under way early."

His keen old blue eyes were surveying every detail of the camp. He noted the two camp beds in the heart of the feathery cluster of junipers some little distance from the fire. Hollister had picked up the blankets that had reposed a few feet from the fire, tossing them across an adjacent sagebrush as if to air them; but Whetzel had observed the arrangement as he came out on the rims above. The blankets had been spread across three dead tumble weeds and a few juniper boughs, so arranged as to resemble the contours of a human form. A rope, stretched from this dummy to the camp bed in the junipers, could be manipulated with light twitches and so cause a slight movement of the boughs as if a sleeping figure stirred beneath the blankets. The old man chuckled and chanted a verse of an old range song:

> "A riderless horse went careening
> Away from Cactus Lill's,
> We knew what that would be meaning,
> For the horse was Whistlin' Bill's.

"Oh! His horse went back to the wild bunch,
His horse went back to the wild bunch,
His horse went back to the wild bunch—
A dead man's horse in the hills!"

Hollister grinned.

"You're in a real melodious frame of mind for so early in the day," he said. "There's a dead man's horse in the hills, right enough, and there'll likely be more unless folks hereabouts mend their ways."

A hawk voiced a high-pitched scream from back in the hills beyond the rims. The sound was repeated at intervals.

"This country is populated with talkative fowls," Whetzel remarked. "It was an early-rising raven that announced my arrival. That hawk, now, was likely disturbed at his breakfast by some one else riding this way."

"Folks that enter by way of the back gate always startle our poultry," Hollister said. "When they cackle we know strangers are coming. Soon as they come to know that you're friendly they won't bother to announce your arrival."

Langford, leading a pack horse, rode into sight

on the rims and descended to the bottoms by way of the mustang trail previously used by Whetzel.

"I camped at a water hole four miles back — Lone Cottonwood Spring — and it was blocked clear shut, not even one route left open so cows could get in to water when I landed there," he stated without preliminary parley. "It's one thing to close a water hole to keep your horses inside over night, but it's something else again to leave it shut. That's three I've found, all sizable bottoms, that was closed off. I opened 'em and I figure to see that they're kept open."

Hollister turned to him with a gesture of irritation.

"Now it was real enterprising of you to open them and put me to the trouble of going back to plug them again. I'm shutting off some complete, so mustangs will have to take to watering at certain places where we've left one route open. From now on when you find one blocked hereabouts, just ride on and leave it as you found it."

"You don't really imagine that I'll allow a parcel of drifting mustang hunters to come romping in here and shut off water so my cows can't get to it, now do you?" Langford inquired.

" You know range custom. If you don't, I'll tell you. One of the first points is that you can't close off a water hole."

" Not on the open range, you can't," Hollister conceded. " But I've heard somewhere, seems to me, that Spanish Acres is owned ground."

" And I'll use it as my range up until the owner acquaints me with something different," Langford declared.

Whetzel broke into the debate, speaking in a casual vein.

" Maybe that's what Mr. Hollister, in a roundabout sort of fashion, was aiming to acquaint you with," he proffered. " There's talk to the effect that he owns Spanish Acres himself."

Hollister knew, from the occurrence of the preceding night, that this rumor must be afloat. Langford's whole figure seemed to sag as if he had been suddenly stricken with a blasting illness. His eyes sought the face of one after another of the group as if seeking denial of Whetzel's utterance. He read confirmation instead.

" It wasn't even for sale," he said. " They refused to put a price on it."

" But I was a friend of the family," Hollister

said, by way of an offhand explanation. "So I expect that will settle any dispute as to how I'm to operate on my own premises."

"On the contrary," Langford retorted, "it only just starts a dispute." He then made the same statement that old Tom Langford had once made to Al Porter and which the son had made to every subsequent owner of Spanish Acres: "You sell out to me, Hollister, or I'll run you out of business."

"I'll sell — if you pay my price," Hollister offered.

"Name it," Langford requested.

"There's somewhere round a million and a half acres in the grant. I'll sell for a dollar an acre."

"I'll buy it by the section, not by the acre. Acres ain't any unit of measurement in this country," Langford declared. "I'll give you fifty dollars a section."

"That's something less 'n a tenth of what I'd consider," said Hollister. "We can't deal. Adios."

He was turning away when Langford addressed him again.

"I'll do as I've always done and range my

cows over every square foot of it," he said. "There's no law to keep cows off of owned land unless it's fenced."

"That's a fact," Hollister agreed. "They boast that there's no law of any variety south of the Palo Verdes, anyway. But I came in here to get along, not to make war unless I'm crowded into it. Whatever of your cows drift into Spanish Acres up until I fence will be welcome."

"Drift!" Langford scoffed. "I'll shove twenty thousand head in here the first time my range is short."

"Then you'll lose twenty thousand head of cows, Langford," Hollister predicted. "Because water will be still shorter. I'll block every water-hole in Spanish Acres solid if you try it."

"And I'll have men opening 'em," Langford countered.

"Then, right after one job of opening, you'll find a brace of warriors intrenched at every water hole when you elect to do it again. Cows can't live on grass unless they can collect a drop of moisture now and then. Strays will be welcome, but a general drive into here will find it the most arid region extant. If the prevailing fashion

hereabouts is for a man to take what he can by force and hold it the same way, then I'll stock up with warriors first. Here's the first two."

He pointed to Farrel and Alden.

"I've played that game too. I came in here peaceable, and not looking for trouble. I'd rather get along with you than not. But if you won't let me, why set your own pace. Now I reckon we understand each other. That'll be about all I've got to remark."

VI

Hollister, riding at a shuffling trot and leading two pack horses, rapidly overhauled the plodding figure that moved along in the wake of two burros.

"Howdy, Ol'-timer," he greeted, pulling alongside.

"Nice day, Stan," the old desert rat returned. He eyed the two pack horses. "Going into Rolavi Wells for supplies, I take it. Why'n't you send Alden or Farrel?"

"No reason in particular," Hollister said. "Only I thought I'd come myself."

"After this, I wouldn't," Whetzel counselled. "If I was in yore shoes I'd be a mite apprehensive about sauntering into Rolavi Wells any oftener than was downright necessary."

"And for why?" Hollister inquired.

"I reckon you know, but that you'd like to hear why I think the same way as you do about it," Whetzel chuckled. "First off, the air in congested centers like Rolavi ain't noways so healthy

as the nice fresh atmosphere out in the desert — where a man can breathe easier and see farther."

"There's something in that," Hollister conceded. "But the hills are clear full of Tasaos and I do hear tell that they're real unfriendly to any one who happens to be owning Spanish Acres."

"The hills are full of 'em, for a fact," said Whetzel. "A man can't move without running across one — specially near where you're camped. I'd stay right out there amongst the ravens and the owls, son, where no man can come up on you."

"Sutanak and a parcel of twenty-odd Tasaos are in Rolavi Wells to do some trading," Hollister explained. "And I wanted special to see Sutanak."

Sutanak was head priest and high chief of the tribe of Tasao.

"Then you turn back and I'll toddle along and tell Sutanak to meet you wherever you say out in Spanish Acres on his homeward way," the old prospector offered. "Sutanak is by all odds the shrewdest redskin of my widespread acquaintance, which extends from the Crees to the Yaquis north and south and upwards of sixty

years east and west. Better let me pack your message to Sutanak and you keep out of Rolavi Wells."

"This once I'll wander on in," Hollister said. "And if things are unpleasant, I won't go back any more."

"I take it that even Farrel and Alden don't know that you sent me in here," Whetzel conjectured.

"No livin' soul," Hollister declared. "It's better to leave it that way."

"Um," Whetzel assented. "And now, since you've set a price they wouldn't consider, you're a logical candidate to get bushwhacked any minute."

Hollister nodded.

"There's good reasons why these parties should go at it just as they have. Down in this country there's never been any reason to kill folks in private, but these killings have been planned that way with a definite purpose. Eventually, whenever a range dispute runs out of bounds and results in a war of considerable dimensions, the Government steps in and takes up with one side or the other. They don't want that here; not

yet. But if every succeeding owner of Spanish Acres meets an unhappy end, there comes a time when no man will pay a fair price for it with that string of mishaps behind, that Tasao death spell hanging over it at present, and facing the certainty of a feud with Langford in the immediate future. It would be a case of acquiring all the grief in the whole Southwest whenever you acquired Spanish Acres. Meanwhile they get free use of the range on a stretch forty miles by sixty, and there comes a time when some owner or his estate will have to sell cheap. In case of any investigation meanwhile, these stray killings would be checked up to the Tasaos, or to some range feud or other, and their hand has never showed. But the minute they get their hands on Spanish Acres, they'll make war, swift and sudden, on all the other outfits, kill off the owners and stir up such a ruckus that the Government steps in. It finds the law already in the saddle, a local sheriff and deputies, recently appointed from their own ranks, in full control of the situation and announcing that the fracus had been a cleaning-up process aimed at lawless outfits."

"Um," Whetzel assented again. "That has

been done before. Brent worked it in the Rositalla country and made good. Slade almost put it over up Wyoming way; Balmore in Tanislaw Basin. Well, we'll see. But, son, you keep under cover. I'm convinced Rolavi Wells ain't a fit place for you to be loitering round in. I'd keep one eye on the horizon and the other cast along my back track to make sure that coincidence don't come romping up on you unawares."

" Being so close, I'll dangle on in this once, and thenceforth remove Rolavi from my visiting list," Hollister promised.

" Then I won't hold you back just for company," said Whetzel. " My caravan travels on a somewhat tardier schedule than yourn. I'll be into Rolavi some time between now and sunup to-morrow, accordin' to the vagaries of life and the temperament of two contrary-minded jackasses."

Hollister found the Tasaos camped on the flat back of the stage company's corrals. He held a consultation with Sutanak an hour after nightfall and repaired to Coulard's. The crowd had not yet foregathered. The gamekeepers were practicing idly. Coulard presided behind the

bar, serving three patrons. Slaven occupied his usual post against the wall. Garcon, the Indian agent, and Judge Sloane sat at a table, a bottle between them, both amiably intoxicated. The Judge waxed ever more profound and Garcon's habitual air of pop-eyed astonishment seemed accentuated by every drink.

Coulard passed a towel along an already spotless bar and slid a bottle toward Hollister.

"I hear that you're owning Spanish Acres," he greeted.

"Anyway, I'm occupying it for a time," Hollister said.

"You know its history, I reckon."

"Yes; from the time of the Castinados on down. A bit stormy," Hollister returned.

Coulard moved his towel, polishing the bar, as if this activity was an aid to meditation.

"Stormy," he agreed. "Why don't you sell it?"

"Why?" Hollister asked. "I've just bought it."

"I'll tell you why. Every owner of Spanish Acres gets into a feud with Langford before he's half started up — before he's got a big outfit

operating there. This wrangling is bad for my business. A big outfit operating Spanish Acres would put out a sizable payroll."

"Which payroll," said Hollister, "would revert to you."

"Just that," Coulard frankly admitted.

"I see; but just what change would it bring about for me to sell? Whoever purchased it would be in the same shape I am now, as regarding a feud with Langford."

"Sell it to Langford," Coulard said. "This deal will never be ironed out until Langford is owning Spanish Acres. On my own account, I'd like to see him get it, or see some one buy him out — some one who'd be satisfied with the Bar Z Bell and would leave off fighting whoever was running an outfit on Spanish Acres. It would be worth something to me. You set your price, and if it's within reason, I'll lend Langford the money to buy it. I've made money here. I'll make more when another big payroll is turned loose in the Sink."

"Langford wouldn't meet my price," Hollister prophesied.

"What is your price?"

"A dollar an acre," Hollister announced.

Coulard whistled softly.

"No. It's safe to say that he wouldn't — him nor no other man. But he'll pay round a hundred and fifty dollars a section. I could stake him to about that figure — but no more."

"Any figure less 'n what I stated wouldn't cause me to stop and consider it," Hollister declared. "I'll run it myself."

"What sort of a layout do you figure to start up with?" Coulard asked.

"I haven't just quite decided," Hollister admitted.

Langford entered later and took up his post at the wheel. A bunch of miners came down the trail from the mine. Hollister lingered till the crowd began to thin. Langford, quite drunk, had gone to bed in one of the long string of 'dobe structures that constituted the lodging facilities of Rolavi Wells. Slaven had gone into Coulard's enclosed office at the rear of the room and was conferring with the proprietor behind closed doors. Eventually Hollister left the room. The night was black and he stopped for a moment to allow his pupils to become readjusted to the

change. The lights and the murmur of voices proclaimed the fact that the two Mexican fandango houses across the square were still doing business. A guitar twanged softly out in the open square and several voices were lifted in the high falsetto of Mexican vocal effort. There was a sudden clamor of canine voices from the vicinity of the Indian camp. Hollister entered the room, midway of the chain, that had been allotted to him for the night.

He crossed to the back window and peered out. The dim outlines of sheds and corrals were vaguely discernible.

"In the interests of discretion I'll just turn in without lighting the lamp," he decided. "It would be downright foolhardy to lay myself wide open to coincidence."

He turned toward the front of the room and scratched a match, shielding it with cupped hands to light a cigarette. There was a sudden shattering report, a red spurt of flame leaping toward him. He dropped flat to the floor, extinguishing the match with a single exhalation; but even as he dropped he knew there would be no second shot.

The red splash had leaped at him from in front,

yet the roar of the shot had come from behind. He divined exactly what had occurred. Against the front wall of the tiny room stood a rickety washstand surmounted by a grimy mirror. Standing as he was, at one side of the window with his back to it as he lighted his cigarette, the light from his cupped hands had been just dim enough and the mirror sufficiently dirty to make it appear to the man outside the rear window that Hollister was facing him and he had fired at the reflection in the mirror.

During the split second in which this solution was flashing through his mind, he had swerved to the window and, gun in hand, was crouching there. A dark shape, bulky in the gloom, yet moving with surprising agility, disappeared toward the rear of the Nugget. There was a single dim ray of light, then darkness again.

Hollister moved swiftly through the front door and headed for the Nugget. Sounds had suddenly ceased and all was dead quiet save for an added outburst from the clamoring dogs at the Indian camp.

"What's up?" a voice hailed from the open front door of the Nugget.

"Shot out behind somewhere," Hollister answered laconically.

Slaven and Coulard emerged from the latter's closed office in the rear end of the room.

"Wasn't that a shot?" Slaven asked. "Who fired it?"

"It came from out back somewhere," Hollister said.

Slaven saw him for the first time, and for a fraction of a second his sleepy eyes flipped open.

"We'll have a look," he announced. "You come with me, Hollister, and you, Sloane. Rest of you stay here so's not to litter things up."

He detached one of the wall lights and led the way through the rear door. The space immediately behind the Nugget was floored with flat stones upon which a track would not show, but the area in the rear of the string of adobe rooms was carpeted with an inch of white dust that revealed every print as clearly as if made in new snow. This stretch was littered with both boot prints and moccasin tracks. Slaven grunted.

"Looks like every man in Rolavi and every one o' them miscreants from over at the Tasao camp had been shuffling round back here."

He moved along the rear of the string of buildings, holding the smoky lantern aloft.

" Here," said Hollister, pointing. A window glass revealed a round hole with fine lines radiating from it. " Wherever it came from it ended up here."

" Huh! " Slaven grunted. " We'll step in and see if the occupant stopped it."

" Why, this is my room! " Hollister exclaimed. " These here are my personal effects scattered round. I heard that shot just as I was leaving to go back to the Nugget, but I didn't have no notion that it come flitting in here."

" Then there's no need to look for a corpse," Slaven said, regarding Hollister. " Who do you think would be making a try for you? "

" Narry a surmise," Hollister declared.

" Them moccasin tracks — with you owning Spanish Acres," Slaven said meditatively. " I wonder now. It might have been one of them."

" So it might," Judge Sloane agreed impressively. " That's the logical conclusion."

" Yes — it might be that," Hollister agreed.

" The dogs started raising hell over at the Injun camp about then," Slaven said.

"Yes, I recall the fact perfectly," Judge Sloane testified. "I made a mental note of the commotion. Then came the shot."

"Now, let's see," Slaven pondered aloud, as they returned toward the rear of the Nugget. "Where's Langford? You and him has had words."

"Nothing to speak of," Hollister dissented quietly. "Noways serious enough to call for that. And besides — Langford, I reckon, wouldn't be up to that sort of thing. He'd more likely come aboiling and shoot it out with a man from in front."

Slaven nodded.

"That would be Langford's method. But ravin' drunk, like he was to-night — no telling how a man will perform with his innards stoked with two quarts of licker. Anyway, it won't hurt to step into his room."

Sloane remained outside the door and the other two entered.

Langford, half-dressed, was sprawled on the bed. His boots, chaps and gun belt reposed on the floor. Slaven shook the man and he muttered thickly as if in a drunken stupor, then sat up on

the edge of the bed and peered about him blankly, apparently unaware of the intruders.

Slaven stooped and extracted Langford's gun from its holster.

"I'll have a look at it," he said. He placed the lantern on a chair and examined the weapon. "There's one empty shell in it," he said; then to Langford, "I wonder if you're quite as inundated as you make out to be."

Langford mumbled a few unintelligible words and swayed unsteadily.

Slaven turned back to Hollister.

"You act mighty unconcerned about it all," he remarked. "I wonder now. You wouldn't put over that shot yourself just to frame somebody else?"

Hollister laughed easily.

"I hadn't thought of it," he confessed. "I suppose now you'll want to inspect my gun, just to make sure."

"It won't hurt to take a look at it," Slaven said.

Hollister handed over the weapon. Slaven flipped out the cylinder to inspect the chambers, manipulating it with his right hand while he still

retained Langford's gun in his left. He snapped the cylinder back into place and looked up at Hollister, who stood just outside the circle of light thrown by the lantern. Slaven's eyelids had opened to their fullest extent in that peculiar lifting fashion till his eyes seemed almost round, resembling those of a night-hunting lynx. For the space of a second his gaze seemed riveted. Then his lids again drooped wearily and his eyes assumed their normal, half-closed state, for the point of focus upon which they had been riveted was a small black orifice — the muzzle of a second gun which Hollister held.

"I sometimes pack a second gun inside my shirt," Hollister explained. "You'd better take a squint at this one too, just to make sure. Only your hands are overburdened now, so I'll relieve you of my other one."

The exchange was effected. Hollister held the retrieved weapon, toying with it until the other was returned.

"Well, anyway, much thanks for the investigation on my behalf," Hollister said. "I think I'll turn in."

This time he struck no match. Instead he bar-

ricaded both doors and pulled coverings from the narrow bed and bunked upon the floor in one corner.

"It would have come in real handy for him to have downed Langford and me with our own guns and swore we started shooting at each other on sight before he could stop us, and with Judge Sloane, his tame dog, to vouch for it," Hollister reflected.

He heard the plodding hoof beats of two burros in the street and a quavering voice raised in song:

> "His horse went back to the wild bunch—
> A dead man's horse in the hills."

"Dad's caravan has arriv," said Hollister. "And he's just dead right on one point. Rolavi Wells ain't a health resort for me. Once I'm out of it, I'll remain a long ways remote."

VII

The round-up in the Rolavi Sink was a one-sweep affair, a single south-to-north combing of the range. Beginning in mid-April, six wagon crews, operating abreast and starting along the rims of the canyon of the Rio Tasao, worked northward across the range. Such calves as had already been dropped were branded, but instead of subsequently throwing these back upon the range with their mothers after each circle, all stock that was gathered was held and moved northward to the base of the Palo Verde Mountains.

One of Langford's wagons worked north through the center of Spanish Acres, the Jessup crew combing a strip along its western edge.

Hollister, Alden and Farrel viewed the wind-up of these proceedings from a ridge that overlooked a valley in the northern extremity of Spanish Acres. A group of riders had just fin-

ished working a bunch of cows in the bottoms. The beef steers had been cut out and were being held at the head of the valley.

The riders had the main bunch of cows under way and were moving them up a side valley that led up into the Palo Verde Mountains. All along the base of the hills this same system was in operation. All Rolavi stock except the beef steers were being pushed up into the hills for the summer, the lower areas of the Sink itself being thus reserved for winter feed.

The steers were assembled in two trail herds to be moved out across the Rolavi Pass, destined for the northern markets.

The cook wagon in the bottoms bore the Bar Z Bell brand painted in big black symbols on the canvas sides.

"Langford certainly makes use of the premises, just as he announced he would," Alden commented.

"I'm thinking, though, that this will be the last season that Spanish Acres will be treated to a general round-up, same as if it was open range," Hollister predicted. "Another year we'll see to it that things are different."

They watched the riders put the beef steers into motion and head them westward along the base of the hills where they would be thrown in with the next similar bunch.

The three Rolavi brands were trail-herded to market co-operatively, a system inaugurated by Slaven in the interest of economy. Each owner sent such of his regular hands and whatever extra help was necessary for the drive in proportion to the number of steers that wore his brand.

"Anyway, we'll be shut of Langford for a spell," Farrel said. "A Bar Z Bell rider was tellin' me that Langford had been elected to go north in charge of the drive. Slaven went last year. I'm hoping it's true."

His hope was fulfilled, the accuracy of his informant's statement verified. Some days thereafter Langford, having lingered in Rolavi Wells for a final conference with the other two owners, set out across the Rolavi Pass intent upon overtaking the drive, which was already two days on its way beyond the Palo Verdes. He rode along the stage trail and when the sun was an hour high he topped out in the notch of the Rolavi Pass. There he halted to listen to an unfamiliar sound.

It seemed but a distant drone, a querulous, complaining chant that pervaded the whole hills, but came from nowhere in particular. It roused his instant antagonism, even before he could identify the sound. He listened, frowning. A shift in the wind, and the sound came clearer.

Suddenly his face was convulsed with rage and he cursed savagely.

"Sheep!" he snarled. "Hell's bells! Who has brought them woolly maggots into the Palo Verdes!"

He knew the sound now for what it was, the combined voices of thousands of head of sheep.

A rattle sounded from below him and three canvas-topped wagons, each drawn by four horses, clattered around a bend and toiled up to the crest of the pass where the cowman sat his horse and waited.

It was through this same Rolavi Pass that every historic invasion had descended upon the Sink. In dim centuries past it had been used by the hostile tribes, entering to make war upon the tribe of Tasao. Three hundred years before the first gallant band of Spanish adventurers had entered by way of this sag in the Palo Verde hills.

The first expedition of half-wild trappers, henchmen of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, had poured in across this route. Some few of the Mormons had entered by way of it during the Mormon migration. Porter, and later old Tom Langford, the first of the invading cattle barons, had sat their horses in this spot and looked down into the Rolavi Sink. Military expeditions, blue-clad troopers in search of the elusive Apaches, had threaded it. Riders of the Pony Express had winged swiftly through it. Later there had come prospectors with burros, and after their first strike the pass had seen the frenzied rush of a gold stampede with swarms of hold-seekers straggling over it. The trail had become a road over which traveled freight wagons and lumbering Concord coaches. Trail herds of beef steers had departed by this route, headed for the northern markets. Every succeeding era of the old West had sent its quota curling through this dip in the crest of the Palo Verde hills. And now, for the first time in history, sheep wagons topped out on the Rolavi Pass.

The bearded man who drove the lead wagon pulled up his horses and nodded to the horseman.

"My name is Wharton," he announced.

The cowman did not deign to give his own name in return.

"What are those sheep doing in the Palo Verdes?" Langford demanded, jerking a thumb in the direction of the distant drone.

The driver seemed to listen.

"Why, they're a-feeding," he explained affably. "This is the time of day they eat. When it comes night they'll bed 'em down. Then they'll be sleeping. That's all sheep do — eat an' sleep an' blat."

"You can't run sheep in the Palo Verdes," Langford stated. "I'd counsel you to take 'em out while there's time."

"Thanks; but the road's too narrer right here for me to make a turn," said the bearded man. "So I reckon we'll hold on. Who was telling yuh that the Palo Verdes warn't good sheep range?"

"I said you couldn't range sheep here," Langford corrected. "It's always been summer range for cows from the Rolavi Sink."

"And this year it'll be summer range for sheep from Idyho," the driver casually asserted.

"We're figuring to let 'em drop their lambs in the Palo Verdes. It's been a long drive down."

"It will be a longer drive back — and a lonesome one — for you won't have any sheep to keep you company if you don't start now," Langford predicted. "We'll never let you overrun our range with your rotten woolly maggots. It means war if you don't turn back to-day."

The driver spat over the wheel and released his brakes.

"Yep, I reckon," he assented indifferently. "Well, we've been through all that afore now and most of us is still alive; maybe we'll wiggle through again. G'day."

VIII

The crisp evening air was spiced with the tang of sage and cedar. The breeze that rippled down the slope from the north was freighted with the additional incense of spruce and pine, for here was where desert and forest met and merged. The first steep pitch of the hills tossed abruptly skyward, their lower slopes covered with juniper and piñon pine. The higher reaches were clothed with spruce and yellow pine, shot through with groves of silvery aspens. The country to the south afforded every variety of desert landscape; sage-clad benches, choppy expanses of colorful, eroded rocks and ledges, greasewood flats seamed by arroyas; mesquite, cactus, yucca, cat-claw and black browse.

Hollister waited with Farrel at a water hole close under the base of the Palo Verdes, waited for Tommy Alden to come down from the hills with a report as to the whereabouts and progress of twenty thousand head of sheep that had been long on the way from Idaho.

" That will be Alden now," said Farrel, pointing. " And he's bringing one of the boys along with him."

" Wharton," Hollister stated, after turning his glasses upon the descending pair of horsemen. " Those roan whiskers of his loom up."

Wharton greeted his chief with characteristic casualness.

" War's been declared but no blood let," he announced.

" Langford met the wagons at the head of the pass this morning and delivered his edict," Alden explained. " Turn back or war to the last lamb."

" We can shove 'em down here in two days — forced march," Wharton said. " And none too soon. Some of 'em will begin dropping lambs inside a week. Say when you want 'em."

" Just as soon as ever you can get them down into Spanish Acres," Hollister instructed. " It couldn't have been timed better."

A big force of cowhands had accompanied the trail herds north. Such of the riders as remained behind would ride the Palo Verdes throughout the summer, branding summer-dropped calves and preventing Rolavi cows from drifting down

the far slope of the hills. The most of these, after having moved their charges into the hills and scattering them where there was grass and water in abundance, had repaired to Rolavi Wells for a brief period of relaxation.

"All right. We'll shove 'em right along," Wharton promised. "I'll eat a snack and mosey along back up there to apprise the boys that's holding each band to get 'em moving at daylight and crowd 'em along."

Hollister pointed to a near-by eminence where a pile of wood and dead juniper brush were neatly stacked.

"Everything's all set," he said. "Let's touch her off."

They repaired to the spot and applied a match to the inflammable mass. When the flames had gathered headway Hollister added green juniper boughs to the blaze and the smoke assumed a denser tinge. After a space of three minutes Hollister pointed.

A faint pall of smoke writhed about the crest of a high rocky point ten miles to the south. This haze deepened to a steady column of smoke. Some few minutes thereafter a third ribbon of

smoke curled aloft from far beyond the other. Hollister could visualize still others, far beyond the range of actual vision, one after another, extending southward clear to the canyon of the Rio Tasao, on beyond it to the Tasao reservation.

"We'd better be off," he said. "It's an all-night ride from here to headquarters — sixty miles; and I'd like to be in before daylight. I'd pay a ten-dollar note to see the excitement that's being staged on the reservation at this particular instant."

His mental picturing of the activities, however, fell far short of the actual scene of frenzied excitement that reigned in the Tasao village. Long after nightfall the commotion continued. Dogs barked. Squaws chattered volubly. Here and there a papoose wailed dismally, only to be silenced by some impatient squaw. The desert moon shed its gentle radiance over the cheerless frame shacks and the scurrying figures of the villagers.

The Indian agent, Garcon, was eventually roused by the bustling commotion. Having drunk himself into a stupor, his befogged brain had resisted all awakening sounds until now.

Garcon emerged and demanded the cause of the uproar.

"At dawn we leave for Pueblo Tasao," Sutanak informed.

"All right! All right! Go anywheres the notion strikes you," Garcon urged, with manifest irritation. "Only quell this gabble. A man can't sleep."

"We go there to live," said Sutanak.

"You can go there an' die, for all o' me," Garcon retorted. "But go quiet, and come back the same way."

IX

In common with other range dwellers, Sarah Lee Langford, when visiting about the country, traveled with a pack horse as a conveyance for her personal effects. She had ridden far that day and the led horse, even though lightly burdened, evidenced an inclination to lag.

"Come along, Snips," she coaxed. "Over the next rise and I'll have the pack stripped off of you. We'll stop overnight at Clayhole Seeps."

Her course was leading her toward Pueblo Tasao and the old Castinado hacienda and her thoughts reverted to the mustang hunter of Spanish Acres, whom she had not seen since the day of that first meeting, something over a month before. Any vocation, within certain limits, was what the individual made of it, she philosophized. Mustang hunting as a vocation was apt to prove somewhat trivial as to material returns. But Hollister, casual and offhand as he had seemed, nevertheless had created in her mind the im-

pression that he was an individual of vast ability and resourcefulness. He would, she reflected, wring the utmost from all possibilities presented by any calling which he elected to follow, mustang hunting included. She pictured him catching the wild desert horses in hundreds at trapped water holes, leaving them in these enclosures where both grass and water were available until such time as he could assemble them all in the big compound of the Castinado hacienda and begin the work of breaking. Clayhole Seeps was but six miles from the old Castinado ranch house. She decided to ride over in the morning and see if he had recaptured her missing mare.

A rider careened along a distant ride and she experienced a sudden tense heartbeat of anticipation. She had known that sensation somewhat frequently of late, for she had rather imagined that Hollister would inquire as to her whereabouts and put in an appearance south of the Rio Tasao, where she had been visiting the Fentons, old friends of her father's. Every approaching rider had brought him to mind. His failure to seek her out had been occasioned by his devotion to his calling, she reflected. The rider, having

pulled up his mount, apparently for the purpose of viewing her, now continued on his way.

" Indian," she announced, with a curious sense of disappointment. That regular rise and fall of the rider's arm as he applied his quirt was an unmistakable accompaniment of Indian equestrianism.

An hour before sundown she rode out above the corral that had been fashioned round Clayhole Seeps. Smoke was rising from near the water hole, evidence that others intended to use the spot for an overnight camp. Two burros grazing in the bottoms revealed the camper's identity. She rode into the corral and greeted the old desert rat.

" No gold hereabouts, Dad," she said.

" I'm actually workin', Kitten," the old prospector explained. " I'm repairin' some tanks for Jessup."

The tanks consisted of earthen dykes thrown up at intervals across the shallow draw below the seeps, serving as reservoirs to retain the overflow and also to catch any surface water that might flow down the bottoms during the infrequent rainfalls.

Sarah Lee was fond of the wandering prospector.

"I'll cook the evening meal for you, Dad," she volunteered. "You sit down and smoke your pipe."

During the preparation of the meal she experienced again that sudden moment of glad anticipation and subsequent disappointment at the sight of a distant rider.

"Injun," Whetzel stated, following the direction of her gaze. "An Injun swings his quirt regular every livin' jump. I've been wondering why there's so many Tasaos snooping round over here of late. There's sign of Injun night camp at every water hole over Spanish Acres way and new wikiup shelters in the junipers. There's a surplus of hawk, owl and raven conversation going on in the hills."

"Signalling?" she asked, and the old desert rat nodded.

As the meal progressed Whetzel paused in the act of conveying a morsel of food from his tin plate to his mouth, leaving his fork posed midway.

"That's curious now," he said, pointing. A

ribbon of smoke curled aloft from a point to the north, far beyond it another. He indicated a similar column to the south. "It's been a long day, girl, since I've seen Injun signal fires going in the hills; not since the Apaches was bushwhacking round with the cavalry after 'em. The Tasaos must be relaying a message from up north somewheres down to the reservation, or the reverse. Maybe a new chief is born or an old one died or the whisky's run out or what not. Anyway, they're sign-talkin' some message across the country."

It was somewhere round nine o'clock of the following morning when Sarah Lee rode into the deserted village of Pueblo Tasao. It was not quite deserted, however. Twice she caught glimpses of black heads peering at her from round the corners of tenantless adobes, the heads being furtively withdrawn as she looked. There were a few moccasin tracks in the drifted sand banked in the deserted galleries. She rode on up the slope toward the Castinado mansion. There was an air of medieval substantiality about it; the gray moss on the aged structure; the magnificent trees, more than a century old, that rose

from the compound; the ten-foot 'dobe wall that enclosed it, the firing slots along its crest, from behind which the retainers of the first Castinados had fired flintlock and arquebus. In fact, she reflected, it looked now just what it had been designed for originally — a feudal stronghold almost impregnable to assault. Even in this day of modern weapons a handful of men could hold it against an army.

She crossed the veranda and knocked upon the heavy wooden door. There was no sound from within, not so much as a footfall, and she experienced a curious little chill of disappointment. Hollister had undoubtedly repaired to his work on the range before her arrival. She knocked again, standing close to the door, the depression in the thick walls effectually concealing her from the view of any one peering from the windows on either hand. Then the door opened, swiftly and noiselessly, and her startled eyes were confronted by an empty aperture. Then, from one side, Hollister appeared, his hand extended in greeting. However, from the corner of her eye, she had witnessed the completion of his act of replacing one of his guns in its holster. As she

entered she wondered somewhat confusedly as to his reasons for such precautionary methods. On the occasion of her first visit he had secreted himself in an adobe dwelling in the deserted pueblo at the sound of her approach. Now he opened the door from one side, with a drawn gun in his hand. What was it that he feared?

" I've been visiting friends south of the Rio Tasao since before round-up. I dropped past to see if you had caught Doll yet," she explained.

" Not yet," he said. " Right soon now I'll pick her up."

" I'm afraid you're neglecting the interests of your first customer," she accused lightly, yet she was conscious of a vague sense of disappointment over the fact that he had made no apparent effort to capture the missing mare.

" Guilty," he confessed. " I reckon I should have had her in before now; but I've been busy blocking water holes all along through Spanish Acres clear to the base of the hills."

" How many have you caught so far? " she asked.

" Two, a couple of young stallions," he said. " I haven't actually started trapping operations

yet — just fixing to go at it right, once I do start."

She was assailed by a hot stab of disappointment. Drifting riders, amiable but indolent, planning big things for the future, vague things, but always deferring the effort of attempted accomplishment until to-morrow, were no novelty to her. She had known many. They were, in fact, the rule rather than the exception. Yet she had thought Hollister of a different stamp, purposeful and resourceful. Her picturings of his operations were so far wide of his actual accomplishment to date that she felt somehow that he had deliberately defrauded her; and also she felt the urge to punish him for her own miscalculation in her estimate of him.

"You don't need to bother about Doll," she said. "She's growing older year by year, and she'll probably be feeble and decrepit by the time you catch her."

"I expect I have been a bit remiss," he apologized. "But I'll have her for you real soon now." His gaze wandered about the big living room. "You know, just sitting here and speculating as to all that's happened within these walls

in the past two hundred years, picturing all the Spanish dons and ladies that reigned here in the days of the Castinado régime, does set the urge for empire to smoldering, like we was remarking the other day. I can feel my own ambitions sprouting. I've been figuring what it would mean to sit in as the monarch of the whole Rolavi Sink."

"You'll never acquire control by sitting and speculating — and catching two mustangs a month," she stated with a touch of asperity.

"Likely not," he assented equably. "As to that, if all the mustangs in the Rolavi Sink were captured and marketed in one bunch, they wouldn't bring but a fraction of the value of Spanish Acres."

"Of course, I know that," she returned. "But if every man admitted defeat in advance, there would never be any worth-while achievement in this little world of ours."

He did not make direct answer to this except by an almost imperceptible nod and his next remarks seemed but casual speculations.

"As to acquiring Spanish Acres — just the sound of owning twenty-four hundred square

miles of ground sounds big, and it is, but when you consider it, the man who owns it has to face practically the same problems that confront the man who runs his cows on the open range. He's forced to pare operating expenses down to where he can make a living profit. Wages are twice as high in the Rolavi Sink as anywhere else in the range country — way too high. A monthly payroll the size the rest have saddled on to them would be too much of a dead weight for Spanish Acres to carry on the start and pay out. It's isolated here, and an outfit has to meet another's pay scale or have his hands dissatisfied. It was Slaven's philanthropy in giving his hands almost double pay that started it."

She nodded agreement. Her brother had complained that Slaven's generosity in the matter of wages had worked a hardship on the Bar Z Bell.

"But with a big crew of hands and a minimum payroll Spanish Acres would pay on itself in big shape," Hollister prophesied.

"Yes," she assented. "But how could that ideal state of affairs be brought to pass?"

"Indians," he stated. "It's current report that an Indian is too shiftless to lift a hand; and

it's a fact that most of 'em aren't over-energetic about tackling jobs that are foreign to their notions — such as digging ditches, grubbing sagebrush with a grub ax, clearing fields of rocks with a pick and crowbar and other such little chores as the white man figures they ought to be delighted to perform for a dollar a day. They won't; but put 'em at something they like, and they will. We've been real blatant about our national honor and integrity, but we've put in a century at violating every treaty we ever made with the Indians, bar none, shoving a tribe from one spot to the next with pretty promises of finality — only to prod 'em on into some still more worthless area which was certain to render 'em dependent, just whenever some white settlers decided they wanted the land. I'm not arguing the right or wrong of it from the standpoint of expediency, but just stating a fact."

He pointed down to the deserted village.

"There's one case in point — a whole tribe deprived of its homes because of the fancied rights of one white settler — a tribal that had always been self-respecting and self-supporting. They herded 'em over into a reservation so the Indian

Bureau could make citizens of 'em. And by way of making citizens of them, the Bureau says to the Indian, in effect, 'You're too shiftless to work; and as long as you stay that way, I'll see that you don't have to exert yourself. You don't have to raise stock; there'll be a beef issue. You don't need to put in crops; we'll give you a grain issue. Don't bother to weave blankets. There's going to be a blanket issue.' Now that's one fine way to manufacture citizens. Wouldn't it be better all round for the Tasaos to be back here in their own village, making their own livelihood like they always have?"

"Yes," she said. "It was an outrage to exile them."

"A plain steal, and a raw one," Hollister agreed.

"If I owned Spanish Acres I'd give back that one little corner — the village and the Valley of Springs — to the Tasaos," she declared.

"Or invite them to work out the price of it," he amended. "So would I. Maybe, between us, we can map it out."

"But not by catching two mustangs a month," she said.

And this time there was no asperity in her tones, rather a suggestion of abstraction.

"No," he returned evenly. "I expect that won't do as a steady income. A man would break behind."

It was not in her nature to be unkind and she was suddenly all contrition for the possible hurt she had dealt him.

"I'm sorry I was snappy," she said impulsively. "I'm out of sorts to-day. I'll promise not to scold any more."

"Why, bless our wild hearts," he commented softly. "Now that was nice of you. You're absolved. After all, you were only dispensing sound wisdom, and just what would be the use of having a partner who didn't take sufficient interest in the game to point out the flaws. I'm mapping out a play that may turn the trick and put us in the saddle. Likely you won't approve of it, but anyway, I'll be ready to acquaint you with the details in a day or two. And about your mare, I've got her located, trailing with a band of paint horses about fifteen miles from here. I'll see that you get her before long now."

"Don't bother, really," she urged. "But it's

nice of you to take the trouble for a little nag that isn't actually worth twenty dollars, just because I happen to want her."

"It's no bother," he said. "And besides, I'd like to put in considerable time doing things just because you happen to want them."

When she had covered some three miles of her return journey toward Clayhole Seeps she was joined by five horsemen, Slaven and four of his riders, Cole Webber, Cotton Moss and two others.

"Been over visiting the sheepman?" Slaven asked.

"Sheepman?" she echoed. "I've been over to see the mustang hunter of Spanish Acres to get him to catch a mare for me."

"Mustang hunter," Slaven chuckled. "That's what he was aiming to pose as. But his disguise fell off when one o' the boys recognized him as an Idyho sheepman. It's being talked around that he's bought Spanish Acres."

Sarah Lee felt as if the power for ordered thought had suddenly deserted her, leaving her mind a frothy whirlpool of fragmentary ideas. Sheepman! She had heard that term used only

as an epithet. She knew nothing of sheep save the cowman's version that they ruined the range, rendering it unfit for cows; that a sheepherder was a shade lower in the social scale than an Indian dog with the mange.

"There must be some mistake," she faltered.

"There is — a downright fatal mistake, and he'll right soon find it out when your brother steps in behind him," Slaven predicted. "It'll be war to the hilt betwixt him and the Bar Z Bell if he tries to bring sheep into the Rolavi Sink. It's the Bar Z Bell he'll be cutting into mostly, so it'll be Langford that'll be out after his scalp. Right now his sheep are boiling through the Palo Verdes. He'll be holding 'em up there to lamb. The Bar Z Bell boys will riddle them at lambing time."

"How?" she asked.

"There's any number of methods," Slaven said. "One o' the most effective is to gather a bunch of cows and stampede 'em across a bed ground. Don't worry, girl, your brother'll know how."

The rest of the conversation scarcely penetrated her abstraction. Fragmentary scraps of

predictions as to what her brother and the Bar Z Bell hands would do toward annihilating sheep and sheepmen kept bobbing to the surface of her consciousness for days thereafter, as bits of drift cast up to the surface of an eddy. But now she scarcely heard them. Her thoughts were centered upon the fact that Hollister owned Spanish Acres. At first she felt a hot stab of resentment that he should have withheld this fact from her. This plan of which he had spoken, then, was the installation of sheep. He had said that she might not approve. Resentment was replaced by a cold sense of dread as the import of certain things became clear to her. The tragic finish of every successive owner of Spanish Acres paraded through her mind. She had ascribed these events to accident, even in the face of widespread speculation as to just what part the Tasaos might have played in them. But now, with a new owner on the premises, the hills were full of Tasaos, all seeming to slink stealthily about the vicinity. This circumstance, in the light of her new knowledge, seemed to take on a sinister significance. She recalled the Tasao she had seen on the ridge above her on the day she had ridden into the

village to meet Hollister for the first time — the fact that hawks had screamed continually ahead of her as she rode; and the two Indians that had peered at her from the village to-day.

Upon her return to Clayhole Seeps she inquired of Whetzel as to the truth of the reports.

"I've been out of the Sink for a month and haven't heard one speck of news," she said.

"It has been talked around that he's owning Spanish Acres," Whetzel informed.

"Do you believe that the things that happened to the last few owners of Spanish Acres were all accidental?" she asked.

"I've been packing that notion," he admitted. "Still, things don't happen by accident too frequent. It appears that some one has been lending encouragement to that Tasao prophecy that every owner of Pueblo Tasao would meet a bad end."

He busied himself in helping her to lash her effects on the pack horse.

"It won't be surprising if we hears the drums sounding Hollister's requiem some night soon," he prophesied. His tone was casual, offhand, but he was observing her from the corner of his eye

and noted the shade of apprehension that clouded her face.

"I'm going to ride over for a few days with Mrs. Jessup," she said. "If you see Hollister, warn him. Tell him to be careful. It's only fair."

The old prospector chuckled.

"Hollister is the one carefulest man of my widespread acquaintance," he assured her. "He's so apprehensive that he makes up his bed one place and then decides to sleep somewheres else. He hunts his hole at the first alarm and once he's ensconced under cover he's harder to extract than any badger that ever clawed its way underground. Don't you go fretting your pretty head about him."

X

This reassurance, however, failed to allay the cold ache which seemed to have laid a heavy finger upon her spirit. It still persisted when, some days later, she returned to Clayhole Seeps, only to find that Whetzel had completed his work on the tanks and departed. She stayed overnight, broke camp before sunup and rode toward Pueblo Tasao. The morning air was crisp and fresh. A coyote lifted its voice in an eerie howl. Another joined in, and another, in the swelling chorus of the little yellow wolves, the desert choir voicing its tribute to the passing night, a greeting to the lifting dawn. A wan grayness spread across the skies. An owl hooted, the summons for the night prowlers of the desert to go off shift. She watched the transformation from night to day, the higher points caressed with pale illumination while the hollows still swam in vague obscurity. The sun peeped above the eastern horizon. Silver and crimson shafts radiated fanwise from it, a weird and striking sunrise, lending

the effect of a feathered headdress, as if some great war-bonneted face peered over the rim of the earth to see that all was well. It was not a particularly rare phenomenon, this war-bonnet sunrise, and Sarah Lee had witnessed perhaps a half-dozen such before. But always it was striking.

She had covered perhaps three miles when she detected moving objects before her. They resolved themselves into a group of squaws, some of them leading horses that were burdened with packs or that trailed pole travoises loaded with personal effects. Behind them came others in scattered groups, some riding, some afoot, children scurrying here and there among them, ponies and dogs trailing pole litters — a straggling procession, all headed into the north. Most of the Tasaos she knew by name; they all knew her. She rode up to them and addressed a wrinkled squaw.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Tasao come home now," the squaw asserted.

"To Pueblo Tasao?" Sarah Lee asked. Her thoughts flew swiftly to her conversation with Hollister. Already he must be employing a few

families of Tasaos to help with his sheep. "How many come?"

"All come," the squaw informed.

"All?" Sarah Lee echoed. "How soon?"

"They there now," said the squaw. "We come last. More slow. Man say we come now. Sutanak say go. Garcon say go to hell. Ever'-t'ing she feex a'right." She pointed to the east. The fiery red rim of the rising sun was visible above the far edge of the earth, those alternate bars of crimson and of silver radiating from it, a perfect war-bonnet sunrise. The squaw's wrinkled countenance broke into a smile. "See! Manitou, he look." And, indeed, it seemed that the upper half of a war-bonneted face was peering over the rim of the earth.

"Yes," said the girl, "Manitou is peeking over the edge of the hills to watch the return of his people."

She rode on toward the village. As she came out on the hills above the Valley of Springs her heart gave a little skip of amazement. Overnight the village had been transformed; the dead had come to life. Even at this early hour, with sun not yet an hour high, the Valley of Springs was

full of squaws busily engaged repairing irrigation ditches. Half a hundred columns of smoke rose from the 'dobes of Pueblo Tasao. Dogs and children scurried in the narrow, crooked lanes so long deserted. Goats and ponies stood about in the tiny compounds. A burro, loaded with juniper wood, was being prodded toward the village by a half-grown girl.

Sarah Lee remained in the repopulated pueblo for the better part of an hour, then resumed her way in a northeasterly direction. She frequently encountered Indians and from each group she inquired as to Hollister's whereabouts. They all pointed in the direction in which she already traveled. One group was repairing the earthen dykes of some tanks in a shallow draw. Another party was engaged in solidly blocking all routes of entrance to a rocky basin that sheltered a watering place known as Shallow Vats. The flat sandrocks that floored the pocket had been worn by erosion into depressions that caught and conserved moisture. Untold generations of beasts had aided in the process, antelope and bison, mustangs, and, later, range stock, had resorted to the spot to slake

their thirst. Their hard hoofs had worn into the soft wet sandrocks, the sediment thus produced being subsequently scoured out by the desert winds during drouth seasons when the vats were dry. This process through the centuries had fashioned vats that retained a respectable quantity of water after every rainfall. A Tasao family was engaged in constructing a hogan of rock and adobe, its top covered with poles and earth.

Near noon, having covered something over thirty miles, her ears were assailed by a plaintive chant, the querulous complaint of thousands of head of sheep. Far down a shallow valley she located them, a close-packed mass that writhed slowly across the landscape. A canvas-topped sheep wagon lumbered into view. Four riders crossed the valley below her. They were heavily armed, each man wearing two guns at his belt, a rifle slung in a scabbard beneath his knees. Fifteen years before, her father had come into the Rolavi Sink with his cows — and his fighting men. Now Hollister came in the same way with his sheep. She knew what it meant. Every man of Hollister's crew would belong to that breed of men whose trade was fighting.

She was correct in her surmise. His crew had been recruited from the ranks of a clan that was passing for all time as the conditions which had bred them changed. They had learned their trade from childhood up, in border warfare against marauding Mexicans and the hostile tribes of the great Southwest. They had followed it later as warriors for the Texas cow outfits that pushed their stock into hostile territory held by Comanches and Kiowas, taking over the country on the Canadian, the Cimarron and the broad flat expanses of the Llana Estacado. Then, as country-wide demand for their services lessened, they had drifted to whatever points throughout the West that trouble threatened,—range disputes, factional strife, feuds between cattle barons, sheep-and-cow fights and bitter county-seat wars; they had known them all. The outlaws that rode with the wild bunch were recruited from their ranks, as were the sheriffs' posses that hunted them. There was little essential differences between them save that of chance. Perhaps in some factional strife one side had gained ascendency and proclaimed itself the law, which automatically outlawed the members of

the opposing forces, whose cause may have been equally just. There were those among Hollister's men who had looked along their gun barrels and fired steadily into the smoke at sheriffs' posses and had, upon other occasions, stood with sheriffs' posses and fought just as steadily. The dividing line between those inside and outside the law was vague, so vague in fact that chance made many an officer become famed as an outlaw chief, while just as frequently outlaws became famous guardians of the law.

Sarah Lee knew the breed. The crew of the stormy old cowman who was her father had always been largely composed of such men as these, as was the present personnel of Bar Z Bell hands employed by her brother. There was little essential difference between her brother's men, those whom Hollister brought with him, and those who rode for Slaven's outfit, she reflected, save perhaps that a group of Slaven's chief retainers had unsavory reputations as unscrupulous killers without principle or honor. In the main, exactly the reverse was true. Right or wrong, they had both principle and honor in a high degree — codes for which they died unflinchingly in the face of

odds. Chief among these codes was the one abiding religion upon which the whole fabric of the stock industry was based, unswerving loyalty to the interests of the outfit for which they rode. Except for this blind devotion that had led hundreds of their clan to die battling in the face of overwhelming odds, the West would have remained unconquered for another generation. It was a handful of men such as these that had conquered and subdued it, made it habitable for the civilized hosts that followed — hosts that promptly cast out these wildings whose ways no longer fitted into the scheme of things.

She had known many of the clan. The great majority of the dwellers of the Rolavi Sink came from that breed. Most of them she had found personally likable. She knew that killing did not necessarily destroy human kindliness and decent feeling among men. Frequently the reverse was true. There have been great soldiers who have also been great saviors endowed with a wealth of kindliness. In the strictest sense these men were soldiers — fighting men of a sort that the world will never know again. They killed casually and died as casually when their

own time came. It was the significance of it all, the futility, that appalled and sickened her as she watched the riders cross the valley. It meant war between Langford and Hollister — between her brother and the man she was beginning to love. Langford had only to lift his hand and his men would swoop down upon the forces of the man whose invasion he deemed a menace. Hollister had only to lift his hand in turn and his own men would fight as valiantly to protect his interest; good men killing each other. And what was the good of it all? She was weary of strife. Why could not men see its futility?

As if in answer to her unspoken query a rider left the sheep wagon and rode toward her.

"You know now what my plan was," Hollister greeted. "The one I was going to outline to you. Do you endorse it?"

His eyes held hers unwaveringly. He hoped for her approval, but feared that it might be withheld. She essayed a smile.

"Why not?" she asked. "At least I'll withhold judgment until I know there's something wrong with it. I haven't any active reason to dislike sheep. Suppose you tell me about it."

"This is one of the last bands to come through," he said. "There's three more bands somewhere south of us already. You likely missed them coming up. The other four — we were trailing 'em in eight bands of twenty-five hundred each — are already scattered in little bunches between here and the north end of Spanish Acres."

"Scattered!" she exclaimed. "Why have you scattered them?"

"I'll ride a piece north with you and show you," he volunteered.

"Tell me," she said, as they rode on, "why do you prefer sheep to cows?"

"As a general thing it's about an even break between sheep and cows," he explained. "But in this case it's ten-to-one in favor of the sheep. It's the same equation we was discussing a few days back — a big crew with a small payroll. When you predicted that I'd find the Tasaos real trifling as ranch hands, you maybe didn't know that back before your time, in the days of the Castinados, the whole livelihood of the Tasaos was based on sheep; had been for more than a hundred years. Nearly every family was work-

ing a little band of sheep on shares for the Castinado nobles. They ranged 'em all over this country. Sheep furnished 'em with meat and leather, with wool for weaving rugs and blankets — with a surplus over their own needs to serve as trade goods that they bartered off to other tribes for horses, and to Mexicans and whites for guns, axes, knives and trinkets. Before the day when Porter got the whip hand, cleaned out the sheep and put in cows, the Tasaos were a prosperous people and the Castinados one of the wealthiest families in the whole Southwest. Maybe that equation will work out again."

"You'll let them range your sheep on shares?" she asked.

"Just that," he said. "It will eliminate a big cash monthly payroll for a swarm of herders and camp tenders; no big grub bills to foot for expensive canned goods; no shearing crews to hire and feed. Above all, the Tasaos love sheep. It's a passion with 'em, and they'll live with their flocks the year round, tending 'em like infants. This way my help don't cost me any cash outlay, after I can let loose the white hands I'm paying now."

"Not cash, but you're paying for it just the same," she said. "I saw Sutanak to-day and he told me certain things. The tale had to do with your conveying to the tribe of Tasao Indians the Valley of Springs and Pueblo Tasao. It was a big, generous thing to do. I've felt, some way, that you were capable of just that sort of thing."

His eyes and smile caressed her in silent thanks for this tribute.

"But I'm not presenting them with anything," he hastened to disclaim. "They'll pay a pretty stiff price in labor before they're through."

"No price would be too high that will regain their village for them," she insisted. "But the other outfits will combine to fight against your bringing sheep into the Rolavi Sink."

"No need for them to," he said. "There's hundreds of thousands of acres of good grasslands in the grant itself, and plenty that don't grow a hatful of grass to the acre, but everywheres, all through it, there's mile on mile of mesquite, black browse, salt sage, buck brush and other natural forage with grass growing in spots all through it, oceans of natural sheep range. Spanish Acres will support upwards of a hundred thousand

head of sheep without ever grazing a band outside on the open range. The other outfits can go on as they always have. I won't trouble them."

"But they'll contest your right to bring sheep in here, anyway," she predicted.

"Likely," he conceded. "I'm coming in here peaceable, aiming to side-step trouble if I can. But I'm playing for a big stake here, and if they crowd me, I'll have to meet it whatever way I can."

They rode out on to the edge of a valley. Below them, on the far slope, a band of seven hundred sheep grazed under the ministrations of a Tasao Indian, his half-grown daughter and a pair of sheep dogs. Just beneath the two riders a newly erected hogan of rocks and adobe nestled at the mouth of a sheltered draw.

Several children scampered about and a half-dozen pups sprawled in the sunshine. Four fresh sheep pelts were draped across juniper boughs under a bank that sheltered them from the sun. Strings of meat, suspended in small strips from ropes that were stretched from one sandrock to the next, were being sun-dried. Two new-born

lambs tottered about the hogan on awkward, uncertain legs.

" Some of them are dropping lambs already. The main bunch will come on in another week. That's another point in favor of Tasao herders. In every band there'll be plenty of bum lambs; weaklings maybe, or orphans whose mothers died in lambing, or possibly the weakest one of a pair of twins. In a big outfit they can't bother with bum lambs, and there's always a stiff loss that way. A Tasao family will nurse its bums through by hand. Then, too, the Tasaos aren't fastidious feeders, and whenever it's tolerable certain that a ewe is due to die in lambing, or from 'most any cause whatsoever, they'll dress it out and cure the meat."

" But right now, with your sheep scattered in small bunches and with only Tasaos to protect them," she said, " isn't that bidding for trouble? "

" That's one point I failed to enumerate when I was cataloguing the astounding number of duties an Indian didn't have to perform for himself — that the Government undertakes to do for him," he explained. " An Indian don't even have to protect his own property. The Government

undertakes to do that little chore for him too. And every Tasao family is part owner in the particular bunch of sheep it tends."

"But if the Tasaos start shooting at white riders, even if they're raiding their sheep, it will cause such a storm of protest that there will either be a general shooting-up of Indians or the Government will order the tribe back on to the reservation," she objected.

"That's what I know. I've had Sutanak give strict orders that no Tasao is to lift a hand to protect his own sheep, but to scurry into his hogan with his family if there's a raid on — and stay there. There will be other protection."

"When I heard that you owned Spanish Acres, and recalled the number of Tasaos that were slinking round over here, I was afraid for you," she said, "with everything that has happened, and that Tasao spell on the place. I thought it possible that they were watching you — waiting for a chance."

"They were watching over me so that no other party would get a chance," he explained.

"Then the curse on Spanish Acres is lifted," she said.

"At least it'll remain inoperative for a time as far as the Tasaos are concerned," he predicted. He moved an arm in a comprehensive sweep. "Look; a big country. Peer ahead a few years, girl. The day's acoming when you and me can ride from the Rio Tasao to the Palo Verdes and from Monab Wash to Solado Arroya, and every way we'll turn we'll see a Tasao family tending a bunch of sheep — a picture like that down there. And over in the Valley of Springs they'll be growing their own corn, peppers, squashes, beans and such. All of our hands part owners in their own flocks, every family self-rationing; a big inland empire with hundreds of retainers to do our bidding, an empire stocked with half a million head of sheep — your sheep and mine, Sarah Lee." He turned to her, "Because, girl dear, when all that comes to pass, you'll be sharing it with me, now won't you?"

Slowly she shook her head and essayed a laugh.

"That was all make-believe," she said.

"No," he returned gravely, "it wasn't. Not with me. And I some way can't believe it was altogether that way with you. It may be a long day before we meet up again, so I'm going to tell

you. There's never been a day since I first set eyes on you that I haven't thought of you almost every living second. Whenever I ride you're riding with me, and whatever I do I talk it over with you in my mind. It will always be that way with me; and if I was to win out here I'd still feel that I was a heavy loser unless you were sharing it with me."

"No," she said. "It can't be that."

"If I thought you'd never alter that I'd feel like letting it slide," he said. "It wouldn't amount to anything after I'd got it. But there's time for you to change. I'm noways near ready to share anything with you yet for the reason that I haven't a whole lot to share. Fact is, if I'd invoice right now I'd likely show a deficit. I wouldn't wish a half-interest in my present affairs on any one but an enemy."

He gazed out across the rolling hills of Spanish Acres.

"It's like this," he explained. "If some party was to buy a big piece of land for what it was worth and paid two-thirds of the price in cash he'd be rated as solvent and well-to-do up to that extent, even if he was owing the other third.

Now if another party should purchase the same ground for a third of its value and pay nothing down, how would his fix compare with the first? Would he be better off or worse? The answer to that equation is the answer to whether I'm insolvent or real well-to-do. I bought Spanish Acres for a third what it's worth — nothing down and nothing due for five years. I could do that, while no other party could buy it at any price whatsoever. Some day I'll tell you the reasons. So I can't offer to share it with you now. Not till it's paid for and the smoke has cleared. But I could go at things with a lot more joy and satisfaction if you'd only tell me that you'll be waiting to share it with me when that day comes around."

"It isn't that. If I could go into that at all I wouldn't sit back and wait until you had accomplished everything by yourself. I'd come to you now and help you through with it. You know for a certainty why I can't come to you — ever."

"Ever is a long, long time," he said. "Is it because of sheep?"

"You know what it is. It's because I'm a Langford," she returned.

He nodded.

"Yes, I do know," he said. "But I wasn't wanting to mention it."

"I know the significance of those riders that came in with your sheep. And I know my brother quite well. This means war between you and the Bar Z Bell. Art Langford will never outlive his obsession to own Spanish Acres. Dad raised him with that as the chief object of life, and he made a thorough job of it. You're not the sort to give up. I know what that means. I've been through this sort of thing all my life. Art and I don't agree on most subjects, but that doesn't alter the fact that he is my brother and that I am a Langford. I couldn't come to you with a bitter feud running between you and my brother. Don't you see that?"

"I do see it," he said. "I've been speculating considerable along that line myself. I was wondering — with you as the mistress of Spanish Acres, it would be in the Langford family, sort of, now wouldn't it? Why couldn't the three of us pool interests, you and Art Langford and me, and run this country to suit ourselves?"

"Would you do that?" she asked. "Would

you pool interests with the Bar Z Bell if he will?"

"I'd do anything within reason under the canopy to have things come out right between you and me," he declared. "There's reasons why I'd rather string with Langford than not. He likely wouldn't listen to me on the start, but when he comes back you tell him."

"Yes, I'll tell him," she said.

"And now tell me. If I can avoid war and make my peace with Art — can I come riding over and take you back home with me?"

She broke into the old bubbling laugh that he remembered from the hour of their first meeting at Pueblo Tasao.

"That's not the polite way any more, to just ride off with a lady," she chided. "And, besides, you shouldn't want everything all at once, Spanish Acres one day and me on the next — the two chief prizes of the Rolavi country. What would you be wanting to-morrow?"

"With both you and Spanish Acres," he said, "I expect my wanting would be fulfilled for life."

"I just couldn't be responsible for reducing

your ambitions to that state of repletion. What would you think of me?"

"More every day," he predicted.

"Then I'd better wait a few days," she decided.

"But our days are so far apart, only just an hour now and then, scattered out weeks apart. I can't hardly expect to have you come riding over to see me, and the way things are shaping up it appears that I'll have to keep under cover and confined to my own bailiwick, so I can't be riding over to pay you a visit. Our next glimpse may be a long while removed. I've been wanting you every living second, something strenuous, ever since that first time I set eyes on you. And now, because it's meaning so much to me, and because you're too much of an honest-to-God woman to tell a man one thing when you're meaning another — why, you tell me."

"Oh!" she said, laughing. "A case of laying our cards on the table!"

Then because she was just what he had said, an honest-to-God woman, she told him.

"After that first day I most confidently expected you to turn up at the Bar Z Bell at day-

light on some pretext or another — to borrow a pound of prunes or a pipeful of tobacco. But you didn't that day or the next. By the third day I was sure that something had happened to you, and for the next two or three days after that I was just on the verge of riding over to Pueblo Tasao. Every rider that showed up, I thought sure must be you. Then I was so mad — well, I just up and went down south of the Rio Tasao to visit the Fentons and stayed there. And on the way back, I intended to miss the Castinado ranch house by a margin of not less than twenty-five miles, but some way I just rode right on up and knocked on the door. So now I've told you. Don't you think I've been terribly shameless, to do all the calling myself?"

"I know for sure that you're the loveliest little thing in all creation," he said. "Things can't help but break right for us after this. And now — "

He leaned toward her.

"Oh, no! Not now," she said. But she leaned toward him too. And for many minutes their horses stood very still.

XI

Hollister pulled up his horse and studied the placard that was tacked upon the trunk of a cottonwood where all who came might read; and eventually all who might read would come, for here, instead of meeting at the crossroads, all trails converged at the water holes, and it was in the vicinity of watering places that notices of the election were displayed.

" It's nice to know that we're going to turn into a regular organized county with officials and a courthouse and everything that goes to make a country a nice and safe place to reside in," Farrel commented. " I feel almost as safe as I did this time yesterday, before the ballots was counted. But there does seem to be something real depressing hovering round."

Hollister nodded. Formal application had been made for permission to organize Rolavi County and the request had been granted by the Territorial Legislature.

Whetzel's burros were grazing near the tree

which bore the election notice and the old desert rat presently appeared from behind the point of an adjacent spur.

"I wonder, now, just why that outfit at Rolavi Wells was so hell-bent to organize a county," Farrel said speculatively.

"Why not? They just elected themselves to office," said Hollister. "Doc Slaven as both coroner and sheriff, Sloane as County Judge, Coulard as County Treasurer and Register of Deeds, Cole Webber as County Attorney and Cotton Moss as County Clerk."

"Webber!" Farrel exclaimed. "Does he know any law?"

"He ought to have a speaking acquaintance with it," Hollister declared. "He's never been over one jump ahead of it in fifteen years."

"I once resided in a locality where a parcel of bandits organized a county," Alden contributed. "They voted a big bond issue and marketed it east, then voted the proceeds to themselves for salaries and moved to Nevada. Organizing a county is good business."

"Yes. But this outfit don't want to step out and leave Rolavi County but stay here and grab

it," Hollister predicted. "With that layout in the saddle they can effect any law that's convenient to their aims."

Whetzel joined them and surveyed the election notice.

"I reckon you know they voted on a special ordinance along with the election of county officers," he said. "It was to decide whether or not sheep should be allowed in the Rolavi Sink. The nots had it unanimous. That puts sheep on the black list."

"And any outlawry against sheep or sheepmen will be nice legal practice," Hollister amplified. "I knew it was coming."

The old prospector chuckled.

"Under that ordinance sheep haven't no more protection hereabouts than sage hens. Wide open season, no bag limit. They'll likely be surging over here for their next annual side-hunt; mustangs, rattlesnakes, coyotes and bobcats to count one point each; sheep and sheep herders and Tasaos to count from fifty to a hundred points apiece, and the losing side pays for the oysters."

"And you haven't overstated the case a whole

lot at that," Hollister agreed. "It'll put a nice legal aspect on whatever is done. But this blacklisting of sheep is a step forward for me, for it's considerably easier to combat a campaign of cussedness that is backed in the open by some centralized authority that has to maintain a semblance of responsibility than to go against the same brand of deviltry launched haphazard without any definite proof of the source."

Slaven and Cole Webber appeared on a ridge to the east and rode down to join the group at the water hole.

"I've been lookin' for you," Slaven announced to Hollister. "There was an ordinance that carried at the election prescribing that no sheep was to be allowed in Rolavi County. It rests on me as sheriff to instruct you to move your sheep out of the Sink."

"I wonder, now, if a local prejudice, upheld by a packed vote, can supersede Federal law," Hollister said speculatively. "Public domain is free to any man to range his stock on, cows or sheep regardless."

"I'm not here to pass on the constitutionality of any regulations," Slaven asserted. "That's a

job for the courts, not for the sheriff. It's up to me to enforce such measures as the people of this county sees fit to effect."

"An' now since you've performed your duty by instructing me to move out, why people can't blame you if I elect to stay," Hollister said.

Slaven regarded him sleepily.

"Use your own judgment. I'm just telling you. Sheep is outlawed in Rolavi County. If you don't take 'em outside rapid, folks will be handing you trouble."

"And I'll be busy handing it back," Hollister answered.

He rode eastward with Farrel. They topped out on a ridge that flanked a shallow valley. The plaintive chant of many sheep drifted to their ears. The top of a hogan showed among a clump of junipers.

"That's Makano's band. They lambed a hundred per cent, counting two-hundred-odd sets of twins," Hollister said. "His squaw's nursing upwards of thirty bum lambs through by hand."

They turned off at right angles to their course and after traveling for perhaps a mile they came out into a high sheltered basin of not to exceed

fifty yards in extent. A man was sprawled comfortably on one of two camp beds that were unrolled near a tiny spring that watered the basin.

"How are things hereabouts, Crippen?" Hollister greeted.

"Dead quiet," Crippen replied. "Slack is up on the point yonder, surveying of the country. He'll be down directly."

"It won't be quiet for long," Hollister predicted. "Outside gunmen have been drifting into Rolavi. Hell will break loose one night soon. They'll try to pounce on a number of bands at once."

An hour after nightfall Hollister lifted his head from his pillow and listened. An owl had hooted from somewhere off in the hills — three short notes. The call was repeated and received an answer from some point close at hand. It might be merely a great horned owl conversing with his mate, or it might be Tasaos signalling among themselves. Other owlish voices joined in, some very faint from distance, the number, duration and spacing of the notes varying.

"Too many owls," Hollister decided. "Something is up."

A horse snorted and moved to the end of its picket rope. A small figure glided noiselessly out of the night and a half-grown Tasao lad addressed Hollister in breathless haste.

"Queek! Three stranger — they ride toward Makano's sheep," he announced.

"Roll out, boys! In your saddles!" Hollister ordered. He was tugging on boots and chaps as he spoke. "Hustle. There'll be powder burned to-night a plenty. Three strangers are making toward Makano's sheep."

Four saddled horses were picketed near the camp.

"Farrel, you ride off south and rouse the boys near Watseni's sheep. They may strike there too."

They mounted and whirled through the night.

"It's an even break — three of them and the same of us," Hollister said.

They had reached the edge of the valley when an uproar broke out below them, first the warning clamor of Indian dogs, a muffled thud of running horses, a few frightened blats that mounted swiftly into a swelling volume of terrified bleating accompanied by the vibrations of

thousands of tiny hoofs as the panic-stricken sheep rose and left the bed ground. Then there was shooting. Vivid crimson tongues licked the black shadows of the bottoms as Hollister and his two men jumped their horses down the slope.

These brilliant splotches revealed the fact that three men rode abreast a few yards apart, shooting into the huddled mass of fleeing sheep. Each raider emptied two guns and there was a lull in the shooting. Hollister had reached the bottoms. The raiders reloaded and resumed their killing. Hollister counted the shots fired by the man nearest him. At the twelfth report and the resulting red splash in the night, the raider pulled his horse to a walk to reload as Hollister jumped his own mount ahead, crossing the intervening space in one swift spurt.

The uproar of the frenzied sheep drowned the sound of his approach. There was a single shout of warning from a raider off to the left, a hasty shot fired at Hollister. Then Hollister, leaning far out as his horse overhauled that of the man ahead, brought his gun down upon the other's skull with a solid smash. The raider off to the

left, the one who had shot at Hollister, whirled his horse sidewise and shot at Crippen, only to have his horse go down at Crippen's return shot. Slack's voice was lifted in crisp command from a point thirty yards beyond Crippen.

"Steady! Hoist 'em! Quick."

Then three shots, one from the raider, two from Slack, and a riderless horse careened through the night.

There was a twenty-second interval of silence; then Crippen's voice drawled a warning.

"Easy, Buddy! Just lay where you're at, with your head p'inting away from me. I'm ambushed behint a pebble ten feet in your rear. I didn't like to kill you offhand — and I'll still refrain if you act up sensible. It'll be downright fatal, though, Buddy, if you hitch yourself round any further toward me. Don't do it. Better toss that gun off somewheres in front of you."

"Seems like," the other conceded, tossing the weapon from him. "You've got me, sheepman — and I never figured to be took alive by a sheep herder, either; damned if I did."

The youngster was insolent and unafraid, even in defeat.

"What happened to my friends, sheepman?" he demanded.

"They've spread their wings on the long, long trail, I reckon," Crippen said. "Anyways, they're almighty quiet."

"If I'd only had a dog's chance," the young warrior lamented; "even a ten-to-one shot, and I'd have played even for 'em."

"I know; but you didn't have a chanct, once I got your horse down and was camped in your rear," Crippen soothed. "You can get up on your legs now."

"This one will come round all right after a spell," Hollister's voice announced from the gloom off to one side. "Just laid out."

"But this one, unfortunately, is defunct," Slack declared from off in the night. "It was him or me, after he turned on me ashooting, and I fetched him full between the horns."

"Who was he, Buddy?" Crippen asked.

"Clem Austin, an old-like fellow. I didn't know him real well. But over yonder is my side wheeler, Billy Sharp. You're right sure he's not gone out?"

"He's coming round," Hollister declared.

"You take this pair on into headquarters," he instructed Crippen. "Slack and me'll ride back roundabout. It's likely they're planning to pounce on a number of bands to-night."

The Tasao family had issued forth from the hogan and were off down the bottoms with their dogs, intent upon rounding up the scattered sheep. Their soothing call and the occasional barking of sheep dogs drifted to Hollister's ears as he rode out of the Valley with Slack.

Tasao signals sounded occasionally along their course, signals which relayed the message that the two fast-riding forms were friends. After perhaps four miles they rode out along a rim. Hollister knew that the basin below them harbored a band of sheep. A dog barked from down below. Then all was quiet again.

"With a hundred-odd Tasaos scattered round on the lookout and signalling everything that's going on, it's some difficult for any one to ride through these parts without his whereabouts being known at all times," Hollister said.

A dark figure emerged from among the rocks and addressed Hollister in broken English.

"He says that nobody has come near here, but

that there's three men riding off some three miles southeast of us," Hollister explained, and they held on in that direction.

After covering perhaps a mile Hollister reined in his horse to listen. The sound of distant firing, rapid and sustained, reached their ears. They put their horses into a run and held on through the night. The firing ceased abruptly when they had almost reached the spot. The blatting of terrified sheep guided them to the scene and a Tasao emerged from the brush at Hollister's call.

Hollister listened to his rapid explanations, then followed him to a prostrate form.

"It's Tate," he said. "He oughtn't to have tied into them alone. But of course he would."

He leaned over the sprawled figure, examining it, but there was no sign of life.

Tate, it seemed, had appeared only after the three raiders had held sway for a considerable period without molestation. He had called out to them to surrender; instead they had closed in upon him, shooting as they came.

"They turned on Tate deliberate, before ever he'd fired a shot, so I reckon their orders was to hunt sheepmen as well as sheep," Hollister stated

grimly. " We'll pick up that trio before they can get out of Spanish Acres. They can't have more than a mile or so the start of us, and will likely be riding slow, prospecting for another band of sheep. We'll take this Tasao with us. He can read all the Tasao signals and bring us up on those three." Then, to the Tasao, " Step up on your pony and lead us."

After a space of twenty minutes' riding the Tasao pointed and broke into rapid exclamation.

" They're a half-mile or so off to the east and riding slow, straight north toward the Palo Verdes up an open bottom," Hollister interpreted the Tasao's broken jargon to Slack. " There's a band of sheep bedded some four miles up it. That's where they're headed." To the Tasao he said, " Ride hard and bring us out into that bottom a half mile or so ahead of 'em at some point where it will be handy for us to waylay them."

Another period of hard riding and the Tasao led them out at a point where the bottoms narrowed to a width of some twenty yards. The sides were steep and studded with eroded sandrock.

"Hop across, Slack, and we'll have 'em between us," Hollister instructed.

The Tasao had dismounted and was engaged in unfastening the rawhide thongs that held his rifle, but Hollister laid a detaining hand on his arm.

"None of that! I know you want to. But any time a Tasao takes a hand in the shooting, right then the powers-that-be will herd the whole tribe back to the reservation under guard and our playhouse is wrecked," he said. "Sutanak say no shoot — you recollect?"

The Tasao nodded, and at a signal from Hollister he remounted and led the horses of the other two back out of sight in the brush.

There was a brief space of silence, then the sound of walking horses, a murmur of voices. When the strangers neared the spot one of their mounts nickered and received a prompt answer from off in the brush. The trio halted.

"Mustangs," one conjectured.

"No wild horses hereabouts since the sheepmen closed off all the water-holes," another contradicted. "Tasao cayuse likely."

They resumed their course and when they were

almost abreast of Hollister he barked a command.

One of the men instinctively elevated his hands, only to drop them swiftly and emulate the example of his companions, reaching for his gun. Another of the trio fired a shot at the spot from which Hollister's voice sounded and the ball struck a puff of splinters from the rock behind which he crouched. The three horses jumped forward as one, but the right-hand animal went down in a heap at a shot from the far side of the gulch. Its rider landed on his feet and sought cover among a patch of sandrocks. The other two members of the trio crowded their mounts into a juniper clump and halted.

"Hit?" one of them called.

"No. Horse down," the dehorsed raider announced.

Hollister spoke again. "There ain't a jackrabbit's chance to get off. After your shooting one of my men down in cold blood, I'll see that you don't. So you'd better come out."

The only reply was a shot from the man in the cluster of sandrocks. The red spurt of his gun brought an instant response from the far side of

the gulch as Slack tried for him. This, in turn, called forth a shot from one of the two in the junipers, another from Hollister as he shot down at the red splash that streaked the velvet-black shadows of the bottoms.

The two men had dismounted and sought cover. There was a protracted silence save for the restless movements of the two horses in the junipers. Then the night-prowling folk of the desert began to converse. Owls hooted on every hand and coyotes lifted their falsetto quavers from far and near. Hollister called across to Slack.

" There's thirty-odd Tasao bucks closing in on this point. You can hear 'em, I reckon. They'll break over and hunt these marauders down like coyotes. I don't want that to happen. We'll do the job ourselves. Start picking 'em off if they don't come out in ten seconds."

That space of time had scarcely elapsed before Slack, his eyes now accustomed to the black shadows, his gun long since trained on a dark object close to the base of a sandrock, squeezed gently and at the report of his gun a hoarse grunt sounded from the bottoms. Two raiders poured a

swift fusillade at the spot from which Slack had shot, but at the instant of firing he had withdrawn his head and shoulder behind the rock which sheltered him and the heavy balls flattened harmlessly against it.

Hollister held steadily on a dark figure revealed by the flashes in the bottoms; he fired twice, and there was a floundering crash among the junipers.

One raider replied to his shots, but Hollister too had withdrawn behind his sandrock at the instant of firing.

From off in the night a Tasao raised his voice in a quavering yelp of exultation. A horse stamped restlessly in the junipers and snorted. Heavy, labored breathing sounded from the cluster of sandrocks in the bottoms. There were tiny, metallic clicks as one of the raiders reloaded.

Slack fired again; then Hollister. Some heavy metallic object clattered among the rocks.

"Got him in the gun arm," Slack conjectured, and fired again.

There were two answering shots. Again the quavering yelp, high-pitched, savage and exultant, sounded from the right; others answered.

"We'll have to finish this ourselves, Slack, and real sudden," Hollister called. "I can't have the Tasaos dipping into this. Finish 'em off if they don't come out."

He closed his utterance with a shot. Slack fired twice.

"Wait," a voice called from the bottoms. "Thorpe, here, is dead, and the two of us are nicked aplenty. What's in store for us if we give up?"

"A fair trial," Hollister offered.

"I'll take it," the voice replied. "You can pot us like rats from up there. You win for to-night, but by this time to-morrow the boys will have laid your hangout in waste and dragged you out heels first."

"All right," said Hollister. "But to-night, starting right now, you can come out hands first. Time is short, so get at it."

XII

Tincher and Sharp, the two youthful captives, glanced about the spacious living room of the old Castinado mansion in the gray light of dawn.

"And what's the program for us now?" Tincher inquired. "As long as you didn't shoot us down offhand, I expect we'll be given a trial with a sheepmen's jury."

"No," said Hollister. "You'll be given a trial in Rolavi Wells with a cowman's jury."

"What?" Sharp blurted in sheer astonishment. "You might as well issue us full pardons and bow us out the door. They'll throw us loose in an hour."

"That's what I surmise," said Hollister. "The pair of you, being our first pick-up, will be used in the nature of an experiment. I'm eager to find out just how the new Rolavi County Court will perform. If its work is too loose to suit us, we'll open up a court of our own."

Tasao couriers brought in reports throughout

the day. Forays had been launched at widely separate points during the night, as Hollister had anticipated. Two bands of sheep had been badly cut up before any of Hollister's men had arrived to give help. Another pair of raiders had escaped in a running fight, during which one of Hollister's men had been shot through the shoulder. Another had been shot through the leg in a similar affray.

Slack came in at noon with the two wounded prisoners taken by Hollister and himself in the fight at the gulch. Two other prisoners, one of them slightly wounded, were brought in somewhat later.

Tincher and Sharp were Bar Z Bell hands. The others were strangers in the Sink.

At noon of the following day Sarah Lee Langford rode up to the Castinado hacienda and requested immediate audience with Hollister. She was hot and tired, having been in the saddle since midnight, halting only to change mounts at a Tasao hogan.

Hollister came in from the compound, his face alight, but there was no answering response in the tense face that looked up at him. She placed

both hands against his chest, shaking her head as he would have swept her into his arms. She studied his face, read the gathering concern and solicitude in his eyes as he looked down at her.

" What is it, Kitten? " he asked. " Trouble of some sort? "

For a space she regarded him steadily, then essayed a shaky little laugh.

" I still seem to do all the calling," she said.

He sensed that her tension had suddenly relaxed, as he gave her time to collect her thoughts, and stood smiling down upon her without speaking.

" I'm so relieved," she stated surprisingly. " But all the time I knew, someway, that there wasn't a word of truth in it. That sort of thing isn't in you."

" Sure not," he smiled back at her. " Nothing like that wrong with me. Suppose you tell me just what it was."

" They've been raiding your sheep," she said. " Suppose you tell me all about that."

" One of my men killed — murdered rather; three of 'em set on him in cold blood — and two wounded a trifle. Something over a thousand

head of sheep killed," he summed up. "The Tasaos have likely dressed out every carcass and saved the pelts and every shred of meat."

"I'm sorry. Why must men always fight and kill? It was something like this that I meant when I told you what I did the day when we watched your sheep and your fighting men coming into Spanish Acres. I knew it would narrow down to a feud between you and the Bar Z Bell, so that there could never be anything between us."

"Um," he murmured doubtfully. "Now it's just possible that this fracas ain't as much of a straight-out issue between your brother and me as it appears on the surface. There's some features about it that I aim to lay before you to-day. But first off you tell me what was upsetting you when you landed."

"A rider, a stranger to me — I thought he was one of your men — galloped up to the ranch in the night and told me that I had better call off the raiders because you had captured a number of Bar Z Bell hands and were going to hang half of them without trial as a warning and hold the rest as hostages, to be summarily executed before

a firing squad whenever another move was made against your sheep."

He stood looking down at her, pondering this bit of news.

" That yarn is a most deadly concoction. It would stir this country to a pitch where every man who could straddle a horse and crook his gun arm would be out after my scalp," he explained. Then his seriousness gave way to mild amusement and he chuckled. " There was only one flaw in their scheme."

" What? " she asked.

" It was most ideal to have that yarn emanate from you. It would have set this country afire. They assumed that you'd share the Langford hostility to a certain extent, at least sufficient to resent most strenuously any wholesale execution of Bar Z Bell hands without trial — which you would. But the slip-up lay in the fact that they didn't know how things were between you and me. Instead of your performing according to expectations and appealing for help, which would have brought every man in the territory down on me, you just came posting over here to see me in person and make the rescue yourself."

He broke off to chuckle again.

"I've got two Bar Z Bell hands confined back there in the old Castinado guardhouse. I'll parole 'em to you till they're tried in Rolavi, which is equivalent to freeing 'em now. That will let this hanging-bee yarn fall real flat."

"But I was told you had more," she said.

"There's four others — outside gunmen imported for the occasion. They're not just straight fighting men, like the Bar Z Bell hands, but plain hired assassins. I don't like their breed, so I'll hold 'em here for a while. They've been drifting into the Sink for two weeks now and loafing round Coulard's. Their business was secret, but they did let enough leak out, accidental like, so that whenever a Bar Z Bell hand dropped down from the Palo Verdes for a night's relaxation, he'd hear that there was to be a big raid launched on a certain night and that all Bar Z Bell hands was to swoop down from the Palo Verdes and join in. He would be dead sure to hear, too, that Langford had been hiring these parties and shoving them in here to harass my outfit. I'll gamble my last shirt that Langford didn't."

"No. I don't think he'd do that, at least not unless he was here to manage things himself," she said. "But when he comes back, he'll deny that they were sent in here by him. Where will they be then?"

"They'll be gone," Hollister predicted. "And a first-rate sheep-and-cow war in full swing between my outfit and the Bar Z Bell. He'd deny it, anyway, now wouldn't he? No one would expect him to come out and admit that he had hired them. Likely they don't know themselves where the money came from. They don't care. It's even possible that the parties who secured them and handed them their price let it be understood, confidential like — which would be dead certain to become public property overnight — that Langford was back of it all, but didn't want it made public. I'll bet considerable that your brother don't know one thing about this fracas to date."

He led her to a chair and sat down facing her.

"Let's have this thing out," he urged. "Spanish Acres is a sizable plot of ground, an empire of sorts in itself, forty miles by sixty. One day soon it will be worth upwards of a mil-

lion, a prize worth a lifetime of effort. Except for what-all's happened in here to give this country — and particularly Spanish Acres, a bad name, it would bring that figure now. Just let's suppose that six or eight years back there was some party with visions of empire — and the foresight to look ahead a short space to where the Castinado Grant would be worth upwards of a million — who conceived the ambition to acquire the whole of the Rolavi Sink and set himself up at the head of it. He'd aim at Spanish Acres first. But the ambitious party didn't have sufficient funds to pay what it was worth even in those days. If he had, it wouldn't have helped him, for Al Porter wouldn't sell for any price whatsoever."

"Yes; well, go on," she urged as Hollister paused.

"After Al Porter was drug to death by his horse, right on the heels of exiling the Tasaos, his estate sold off his cows for whatever they'd fetch, come as they run on the range; Slaven bought 'em, you recollect — and they say the price was dirt cheap — and set up for himself over on Solado Arroya, buying out the homestead

of the Mormon settlers for a home ranch. Spanish Acres was sold, unstocked, to Cates for somewhere round four hundred thousand dollars. The price was due to keep going up, unless, mind you, something should transpire to keep it from mounting, until the ambitious party could acquire assets sufficient to catch up with the price. He was acquiring 'em fast. Cates came from a wealthy family back east and he played at the game, kind of, and only part way stocked it. After a couple of years he got tired of that and mapped out a plan to break the grant up into tracts of a few thousand acres and sell it off piecemeal. The ambitious party couldn't have that. About then Cates died — snake bite, it was said. His estate put a foreman on to run the place, but being only part way stocked like it was, it was running downhill fast and losing a right smart of money. They sold off what few cows was left and the place stood here idle. They stirred up a few buyers, four or five maybe, to come in here and have a look at it. Each one, as soon as he landed, was apprised somehow of the sinister history of Spanish Acres. It was whispered to them that Porter had come into the Grant by dispos-

ing of the two Castinados, father and son, as soon as he'd married the daughter; how the Tasaos had laid a death spell on the place and that Porter and Cates had both passed out under right queer circumstances, and that each time the Tasaos had tuned up their tom-toms in the hills. They learned that on top of that they were due to feel the heavy hand of the Langfords if they bought Spanish Acres. There's something depressing about a dead village, like a deserted house that is said to be haunted, only amplified by a considerable margin. I know. I've stood down there in the village and it got me to wondering how soon those drums would be sounding for me. That, along with the certainty that they would be acquiring the enmity of a whole tribe of Indians and a bitter feud with the Langfords along with Spanish Acres, didn't make the proposition loom up very attractive. None of 'em bought it."

"Briggs finally did," she contributed.

"Yes. Briggs had sold his old brand in Texas and he came poking in here. He offered somewhere round three fourths of what Cates had paid for the grant. The heirs wanted the cash and they sold it. Briggs started in easy, and only

stocked up with round three thousand head of cows to start off. Of course, he soon got snarled up in a wrangle with Langford, who wanted to buy him out for half what he'd paid. Briggs was some stubborn himself, and announced that he'd never sell till he died of old age. He died, but it wasn't old age that killed him. You remember what happened then. After he'd been holding on for right at two years, his stock took to dying off mysterious all over the range. Briggs figured they were being poisoned, but he couldn't find the source of it. He knew it wasn't strychnine. That throws a critter into convulsions — speeds up the heart till it hammers itself to death. This acted just opposite, slowing 'em down till the heart just quit ticking, and gave 'em a chance to get away from wherever they'd found it. Folks began whispering round about that Tasao curse. This had only been going on for maybe a week before Briggs acquired a touch of the malady himself, or so it was reported — no one knows for sure — and sat himself down and died."

"Yes," she said, "go on."

"Sutanak is a mighty shrewd Indian," Hol-

lister said. "He knows all about spells, and he hadn't any idea that this one would work out so proficient, so it came to him that some one was out to grab Spanish Acres and was using that Tasao spell for his own ends. If this kept up the Tasaos would fall into disrepute and be confined to the reservation under guard. He didn't want that. He asked the Indian agent to have a marshal come in. Garcon didn't, so Sutanak got suspicious of Garcon along with the rest. Later, during a rainy spell, a Tasao was lounging around near a water hole in a sandrock gulch. He observed a steer licking away industrious at a little hollow in the rock about the size of a washtub. The steer wandered off a half-mile or so. Directly it staggered round and bogged down, tried to get up and couldn't. Inside of a half-hour it died. The buck told Sutanak and the old chief came up to have a look-see at that little erosion-worn hole in the sandrock himself. The rock was still wet from the rain and he scraped out a pound or so of it and had a prospector get it analyzed for him. It showed heavy of potassium cyanide. That's a white crystal. Whoever had done it would mix a few ounces of cyanide with four or

five pounds of salt, put his medicine in a little vat in a sandrock and fill it with water. It would go into solution and the evaporation made a brine you could hardly tell from the rock to look at it. Critters would lick the salt and wander off somewhere to die. In a few days it's all gone. But in that particular pocket enough of the stuff had seeped into the porous sandrock so that it went into solution again when the little vat filled up with rain water."

Hollister leaned over and tapped a forefinger on the table.

"You see, the ambitious party now had assets in plenty and was prepared to pay a good price for Spanish Acres. But Briggs wouldn't sell. Even his stock dying off thataway only made him more determined to hang on. So Briggs had to go. If he wouldn't sell, it was likely his heirs would sell — probably cheap. Briggs died. Then this came up; Briggs had an only sister and she was his only heir. She had it fixed firm in her mind that some one had played it low down on Briggs to try and get Spanish Acres. She had money aplenty, and wasn't going to see any one get the place that might have had a hand

in Briggs' death. So she just sat tight and refused to sell out. So there the party was, all set to buy it, and can't even get a price."

"But she did sell, eventually, to Gillfoyle," the girl pointed out.

"Gillfoyle never owned an acre of it. He came in as her agent to track things down. The best way to draw fire, he decided, was to pose as the owner. He drew fire, but from behind, while he was watching the wrong party."

"And who was he watching?" she asked.

"Your brother was the logical candidate. Then the other party discovered what Gillfoyle was up to — and Gillfoyle lasted about half a day after that. Your brother is real headstrong. He's been dead set to own Spanish Acres, and has performed according, staging an acrimonious debate with every succeeding owner. He's battled with each one in turn, right down to me. This present ruckus looms on the surface like a straight-out sheep-and-cow war between me and the Bar Z Bell, with every other outfit sitting back neutral. Now take any one of those mishaps to various owners of Spanish Acres, or if anything would happen to me, and there'd be an

investigation, just who would be the logical candidate for chief suspect?"

"Art would, of course," she said. "By which, I take it, you're conveying your belief that the logical choice would be wrong."

"Just that," he said. "No man, if he's planning to have some party executed in private, is going to advertise the fact to the world way off in advance. So, instead of watching Langford, like Gillfoyle did, I watched every one else. Take this ruckus we're in now. It'll weaken us both, maybe wreck one of us, without harming any one else. Anyway it comes out — win, lose or draw — one of us gets the worst of it, the other one gets the blame; and there's no other party's hand showed in it all the way through."

She nodded, pondering for a space.

"Then you think it is Slaven?" she asked.

"I know that it's Coulard," he said. "Which amounts to the same. I doubt if even Webber, Moss and the rest of that crew surmise that Slaven is just Coulard's chief henchman. He was dealing faro for Coulard when he opened the Nugget back when the mining boom was on in Rolavi. Did you ever consider what a flourish-

ing business Coulard transacts? He takes in ninety-odd cents out of every dollar that's spent in the Sink. There's nowhere else to spend it. The big part of it's profit. Most of it reverts to him by way of his games or over the bar. Slaven pays his hands eighty dollars a month — twice the payroll that the average cow outfit can afford to be saddled with. The Sink is isolated, off to itself, and the other few outfits had to meet it or have dissatisfied hands. Coulard is merely paying the big part of Slaven's payroll back to himself by way of the Nugget, and every extra payroll dollar paid out by Jessup and the Bar Z Bell and on Spanish Acres reverts to him too. Coulard's finances have mounted something astonishing in the past six or eight years. All the other's haven't as good a toehold as they did then. It's been a whittling process."

"But why would Coulard offer to lend Art the money to buy Spanish Acres?" she objected. "He's always urging that, you know, on the ground that it would be good for his business to have a big outfit with a payroll operating in Spanish Acres. Why would he urge Art to buy it if he wants it himself?"

"There's a number of reasons. First off, Coulard would be in a broil with your brother the minute Art had the least notion that Coulard was wanting Spanish Acres himself. There'd be two factions spring up in the Sink — Langford and Coulard parties; and your brother's well liked. This way Coulard gets all the Bar Z Bell business and is milking your brother's finances into the bargain. Whenever there's a price on Spanish Acres that's within Coulard's limits he'll know it because Langford will go to him to borrow the money. Then Coulard will buy it himself. Coulard takes up the matter of price with every owner of Spanish Acres, plausible like, the way he came at me, as if he's acting for Langford, and that his only personal interest rests with seeing an outfit operating here with a payroll. Meanwhile it's Langford that has done all the negotiating, and it's Langford that's done all the threatening and wrangling, weakening his own finances by harassing every outfit that starts up in Spanish Acres and weakening them too, and it's Langford that will come in for any grief that arises, while through it all Coulard's hand has never showed by so much as a ripple.

I'm not guessing. I know. But right now I can't prove it. And if I could prove it, it wouldn't do any good. Coulard is too much of a power in the Territory to get at him that way just yet. Langford wouldn't listen to me if I'd tell him. But he might listen to you. Just as soon as ever he gets back from the drive, you get his ear and tell him, just as I've told it to you. He'll likely laugh at it, first off, but it will set him to thinking."

XIII

The six horsemen, riding in a knot, were following a course that would lead them past the outskirts of Pueblo Tasao and directly to the old Castinado stronghold on the eminence above the village. Their course was suddenly altered and they veered toward the village itself. This deviation was occasioned by the sight of Hollister riding into the pueblo alone.

"He'll be at Sutanak's," Slaven announced as they neared the edge of the village. "You all post yourselves convenient at the ends of these various lanes. Garcon and me'll ride on and converse with him. If I whistle a few bars you all close in toward the spot."

Cole Webber, Cotton Moss and two other riders separated and posted themselves at the ends of several lanes.

Slaven and the Indian agent rode to the center of the village and dismounted before the commodious 'dobe that housed the head chief of

Tasao. Hollister's horse stood in the little compound.

Hollister, proprietor of Spanish Acres, and Sutanak, head of the Tasao nation, issued forth from the 'dobe at Slaven's summons.

Garcon addressed the wrinkled chieftain.

"You gather this rabble and shove them back onto the reservation pronto. Start now," he instructed. "And that's that."

It developed, however, that was not that — not with Sutanak. He drew himself to his full blanket-swathed height, a figure of impressive dignity.

"Stay here," he laconically announced.

Garcon turned suddenly apoplectic, both in appearance and in manner. His bushy yellow mustache seemed to fluff forth from the mottled purple of his countenance, expanding after the fashion of the tail of a cat that has experienced a dog's insulting attentions. His flow of language was in accord with his appearance. At the termination of the agent's vitriolic harangue the aged chieftain, placid and imperturbable, merely reiterated his previous edict.

"Tasaos stay here."

The agent turned to Hollister.

"You, as owner of these premises, I order to send these Indians back to the reservation instantly or I'll order your arrest on the grounds of inciting an Indian uprising — mutiny against their agent."

Hollister laughed shortly.

"You can order 'em back if you want to. It won't get you anywhere. You know I wouldn't be trifling enough to work it this way without the sanction of the Indian Bureau. There's a deed conveying this village and the Valley of Springs to the Tribe of Tasao Indians held in trust by the Secretary of the Interior."

"That's a lie!" Garcon barked. "I'd have been informed of any such plan."

"Except that I specifically asked that you wasn't to be informed till I'd looked into your case. I know about you now. So I'm telling you."

The Indian agent turned to Slaven.

"As sheriff of this county, I demand that you arrest this man for deliberately inciting an uprising among the tribe of Tasao Indians, inducing them to leave the reservation and rising in

mutiny against their duly appointed agent," he pronounced.

Slaven clucked deprecatingly, apparently still steeped in his habitual lethargy. "Now, now," he admonished, as if soothing a refractory child. "We can arrange all this without any misunderstanding, I reckon."

He sidled a shuffling step or two closer to Hollister, half lifting one arm as if to drape it across Hollister's shoulders in friendly fashion, his old familiar gesture; but Hollister, just as casually, had taken an absent-minded step or two himself, keeping his distance. Then, without so much as a glance to betray his purpose, Slaven launched his vast bulk upon Hollister in a tremendous leap, his long arms outstretched to seize him. Hollister seemed to be actuated by the same spring that had launched the sheriff, for at that precise instant he executed a leap that left him facing Slaven, some distance still between them, and his gun was centered between the sheriff's eyes — eyes that were no longer heavy-lidded and half-closed. The orbs, as round as half-dollars, stared at Hollister with the fixed, lidless regard of a snake.

"Not that way, Slaven," Hollister stated. "Once I'd let you get a grip on me it would be like tossing myself into a stamp mill. Don't try to close in on me, you big yellow-eyed strangler, or it'll be the last move you ever make."

"You're under arrest," Slaven calmly announced.

Hollister laughed.

"Do I impress you that way?" he inquired. "Not yet, or not any time soon."

He returned his gun to its holster. Slaven regarded him calmly. Now, since Hollister had declined to accept arrest, he could shoot him offhand with sufficient justification in the public eye. On the other hand, could he? Quick as he himself was with a gun, Hollister might be still faster. This restoration of his gun to its holster might be in the nature of an invitation to draw. Slaven would take a chance, even a long one, without a second's hesitation if it were necessary, or even expedient. But he had never taken a chance when he could as readily avail himself of a certainty.

He pursed his lips and whistled in apparent surprise — whistled loud and long. Slaven, his

fearlessness that of the animal variety, had also that animal trait that senses menace.

Hollister whistled too, as if in answer, and Slaven suddenly knew that all was not well. It occurred to him that the village was uncannily silent. There was no life, no romping youngsters in the lanes; the 'dobes were apparently tenantless, as if the pueblo hung breathlessly upon the outcome of some event. The sound of hoof beats that had started to life with Slaven's whistle seemed unnaturally loud and clanging. Then suddenly, he knew that he, not Hollister, was trapped.

A man appeared on the flat roof of an adobe house across from Slaven, seated himself on its edge with a rifle balanced on his knee. Four other adjacent roofs were similarly adorned. A gaping doorway was suddenly filled by Farrel; another, close at hand, by Alden. Slack's head and shoulders were framed in the window of a dwelling, the aperture having been quite empty but a space before. Another opening similarly framed Crippen's upper third. Wharton lounged into sight round the corner of a building.

Cole Webber, Cotton Moss and the other two members converged upon the spot.

They were hard men, and cool, not easily startled or disturbed.

The swarthy Webber smiled his easy, flashing smile.

"Nice little garrison — and so well deployed," he complimented Hollister.

"I did think we'd find most of 'em on the range guarding the woolies from the nighthawks," Moss contributed. "That's why we came. Seems like you must have been expecting us after all."

"After a fashion," Hollister assented. "Well, Slaven?"

Slaven shrugged.

"I've come to place you under arrest for inciting an Indian uprising," Slaven stated.

"Only they haven't uprose," said Hollister, calmly.

"They're here contrary to their agent's orders," Slaven said. "And anyway it's no business of mine to pass on their actions or yours. Garcon, here, charges you with inciting a mutiny, so as sheriff I've placed you under arrest."

"Have you?" Hollister grinned. "Ain't you taking an exaggerated view of the situation?"

Cole Webber rolled an appraising eye at the surrounding fighting men.

"He is maybe a bit optimistic about it," he commented.

"Now listen, Slaven," Hollister instructed. "This has brought things right out in the open." He pointed to the Castinado hacienda, gray, weathered and substantial, standing upon the eminence above the village. "I'm playing for an empire of sorts. Don't delude yourself into believing that any parcel of road agents operating as county officials is going to discourage me. Killing sheep won't do it. No fool laws framed for the purpose will do it. I'm here to stay. So you might as well tear up that sheep statute."

Garcon, his own ruffled dignity somewhat convalescent from having witnessed Slaven's lack of success, now spoke up.

"Washington shall hear about this," he barked huskily.

"What a laugh Washington will have when it hears," Webber remarked.

"Inside a month there'll be a troop of cavalry

in here to take you out by the heels and herd these malcontents back to the reservation under guard," Garcon declared.

Webber regarded the utterer of these lofty threats with tolerant amusement.

"A month's a long time," he observed meditatively. "Before Garcon's military expedition gets out from Washington, Hollister, to put you in irons, it's likely you and me will meet somewheres — some nice day when we've both mislaid our armies and are riding alone."

"I'll be watching my back track," Hollister stated. "Just for fear we might meet from behind."

Slaven turned to his horse and mounted, addressing a final word to Hollister from the saddle.

"Hollister, you've resisted arrest with armed forces," he recited.

"I didn't go so far as to resist — just declined," Hollister corrected. "You can make your own surmise as to whether I'd have resisted in case you had pressed me."

"No matter how you put it, you've incited a tribe of Indians to mutiny and you resist arrest

to stand trial for it," Slaven calmly recited. "This day's work has outlawed you for all time."

"I'd rather have a general price on me than to have a private bounty hung on my scalp," Hollister declared. "If I'm outlawed, why, there's my stronghold, up there on the hill. Any time you feel like dislodging me, why just come a-running. We might as well put an end to this powwow. You all can get the hell out of here now — and stay out!"

XIV

Whetzel repaired to the adobe building in which court was in session. Hot as the day was, the room was packed to capacity, so the old prospector contented himself with standing outside an open window, folding both arms on the ledge and propping his chin thereon. For an hour he listened and dozed intermittently. Once his dilapidated black hat slid from his head and fell to the knees of a spectator who sat just inside and who restored the relic with a grin.

Then, all evidence having been taken and all arguments submitted, Judge Sloane prepared to render a verdict. Whetzel removed his arms from the window ledge and made certain cabalistic signs behind his back. From the mouth of a rocky gulch that led down out of the Palo Verdes a big man, who for some time had been training his glasses upon the figure at the window, mounted a horse that was concealed by a juniper copse, covered the intervening distance swiftly, dismounted and strolled to the open

door of the courtroom. He stood out of view, his back against the wall outside, while he fanned himself with a big white hat, occasionally varying this by passing a bandanna across a shining expanse of bald head.

Judge Sloane cleared his throat impressively.

"The evidence for and against these two defendants has been most carefully sifted and weighed by this Court," he solemnly attested. "Mr. Webber, our esteemed County Attorney, has established beyond reasonable doubt — the defendants themselves, in fact, concurring in his conclusions — that they did commit certain acts consisting of shooting and killing an unknown number of animals commonly known as sheep."

His gavel rapped smartly on the table for order as a suppressed chuckle emanated from the throng of spectators and he surveyed them with judicial severity in disapproval of this unseemly levity.

"Order!" he commanded with dignified vehemence. "To resume: It is the desire of this Court to compliment the learned County Attorney upon the conciseness and clarity with which he established his case. However, his in-

sistence that a heavy penalty, either by fine, imprisonment or both, be imposed upon the defendants is, in the opinion of this Court, decidedly open to question."

He paused effectively, mopped the moisture from his pudgy, indistinct features, cleared his throat and proceeded:

"Guilt, if it may be termed guilt, is clearly established. That is, the deed of which these two defendants are accused was committed in fact. However, the laws of Rolavi County contain no mention as to penalty for the deed of which the defendants stand convicted. On the contrary, by vote of the people of Rolavi County, the bringing of sheep into this county or the maintenance of sheep therein, even if their entrance was prior to the enactment of said legislation, is specifically prohibited. Sheep, therefore, are outlawed within the borders of this county, having no rights under the law; and, legally speaking, are technically nonexistent. This fact being established, it is the opinion of this Court that it necessarily follows by logical sequence that any acts of so-called depredation, reprehensible as they may seem on the surface, must also be tech-

nically nonexistent. Therefore, in answer to the contentions of the prosecution, it becomes necessary for this Court to define its own limitations in the matter of imposing penalty. It is within its province to pronounce sentence or to impose fine only within the limits prescribed by the laws governing any given case, to interpret the laws and their application as they stand, but not — and mark you this carefully — to inflict any penalty not clearly specified by laws already existing. If the laws are defective, it is not within the jurisdiction of this Court to alter them, but merely to interpret them as they stand."

Again he surveyed the spectators judicially, permitting a space in which they might digest the wisdom of his pronouncement.

"It would seem, therefore, in the opinion of this Court, that although the deed alleged has truly been committed in fact, the mere fact of commission in itself does not constitute either crime or misdemeanor. This Court has no option but to discharge the prisoners."

This verdict received the applause of the spectators. As they filed out, the big man in the white hat entered and accosted the Judge, who

recognized him as one Wallace, the chief United States Marshal for the Territory.

" Sloane, between you and me personal, as old friends, I want to comment on your verdict," the marshal asserted. " In the opinion of the Rolavi Court, sheep may be intangible, imperceptible and evanescent clean to the vanishin' point, but the Federal Government dispenses with these elements and holds that sheep is just sheep — dead easy to detect in tangible shape by ear, eye or nose. The Government don't dip into every range squabble — since they're so frequent that there's one on every other quarter section — unless a sheep-an'-cattle war gets to running out o' bounds, but whenever it does take a hand it settles all arguments. This here case is one. The Tasao Indians are wards of the United States Government, and the Tasaos are part owners in them intangible sheep. At present they're ranging on owned ground. A white man is also part owner, and as such he is entitled to send his sheep outside to feed on any part of the open range at any time he elects, and no amount of devious conversation can make it any different. These two men have just been dis-

charged on the grounds that marauding on sheep and sheepmen was an impalpable sort of pastime. Let it stand. Them other three goes out to stand Federal trial and will likely have their necks stretched a foot long — imperceptibly, but none the less fatal. The man they killed was a Deputy United States marshal."

Judge Sloane mopped his face.

"That," he said, "puts a different face upon matters — in their case. Now if they were to come to trial before me — "

"They won't," Wallace stated.

"And this deputy marshal — how did he happen along?" Sloane inquired.

"He didn't happen. He, amongst several others, was sent in there at my instigation, with the sanction of the Indian Bureau and the Territorial Governor, to protect Indian property. There'll be no more such marauding against Indian property or attempted regulation of the open range by Rolavi County authorities under this triflin' sheep exclusion act. You'd better write it out of the books. Now you all say the law won't ever come south of the Palo Verdes. The next raid on Tasao sheep will bring it in —

a couple of troops of cavalry. I've been instructed to let you all know that. Now just between you and me personal, as old friends, I'm advising you: The next time you render a verdict similar to the one you just handed down, you better straddle a horse and render yourself, not only intangible, but transparent, because they'll be wanting to have you on exhibit at Fort Ciradua."

XV

Hollister rode to a little sandrock basin in the extreme northeastern corner of Spanish Acres, the point nearest to the Bar Z Bell. There, if Sarah Lee Langford acted upon the message which he had sent to her by a Tasao courier, he would meet her for the first time in two weeks. During that interval he had had but one glimpse of her and then only a long-range view through his glasses as she rode with Mrs. Jessup and two of the Jessup children. It was with a curious sense of breathless anticipation that he topped the last ridge and looked down into the little sandrock pocket.

She was there ahead of him.

"What is it, Stan?" she inquired anxiously. "Why did you send for me?"

"Nothing to fret over," he reassured. "I just couldn't put off seeing you for another day."

"It wasn't that. There was something you were specially anxious to see me about. What

was it? That new tax law? I've been wondering how it would affect you."

They had called a vote in Rolavi Wells to pass upon the salaries of the county officials and to provide means for raising funds with which to defray these and other expenses of county administration.

"Holding elections is a popular diversion at Rolavi Wells," he said. "That measure was framed to wreck me. It's within their limits too, not a flimsy makeshift like a sheep exclusion act. They'll effect a law to back every possible plan to wear me down by piling up my expenses. This is just the start. A tax of two cents an acre don't sound ruinous, but when one man is holding most of the deeded land in the county, nine tenths anyway, then this tax puts nine tenths of the county's expense on him while the others are running their stock on the open range. This will pile on a tax of upwards of thirty thousand a year against Spanish Acres. That money goes to Coulard's henchmen for salaries; then it'll revert to him by way of the Nugget. It means that Spanish Acres will pay itself right into Coulard's pocket if that tax is paid. If it's not paid, but

allowed to pile up, they'll sell it up for taxes and he'll buy it in. Then they'll repeal the land tax. Organizing a new county and controlling it has considerable financial advantage."

"What can you do about it?" she asked.

"Just rest along and pay no mind to it until we can upset that gang in the county seat and put in new officials; then repeal it," he said. "But that wasn't what I had on my mind. You are Art Langford's heir, I take it. Do you know if your brother is owing Coulard and Slaven heavy?"

"Art never tells me a great deal about his business," she said. "He's always in debt to Coulard, more or less, but no staggering sums. Why?"

"It's been talked round for months that he's owing both of them big money. That may mean five thousand or two hundred thousand. Do you know if he's put up a deed to the Bar Z Bell with Slaven to cover his loans?"

"Surely not that," she said. "I don't imagine he owes either of them any great sum. Those big amounts must be just talk."

"That's what I'm thinking," Hollister agreed.

"But there's purpose behind that talk. People get into the set way of believing what they've been hearing and telling each other over the course of the years."

"Yes," she agreed. "But that wouldn't increase his debts, talk wouldn't, without documentary evidence to show for it."

"Documentary evidence can be easy manufactured to fit in with what a whole countryside believes is a fact. There's hardly a man in Rolavi Sink that wouldn't bet his shirt that Art Langford owes Slaven big sums of money."

"But that doesn't make it a fact," she insisted.

"It didn't make it a fact, over in the Salito country, when Girard and Comstock started a whisper that they'd bought the San Estano Grant off of old man Hatfield," Hollister said. "That rumor traveled rapid. If it ever come to Hatfield he denied it and swore something frightful. The very earnestness with which he cussed out the report as an error led folks to believe it was a fact. Whenever either Girard or Comstock was questioned, they smiled and says no, that they hadn't bought it. Their place carried the biggest bankroll in all the Salito country.

Just prior to this rumor they had an extra heavy accumulation of cash on hand. Right on top of it they seemed to run short and was paying in scrip whenever a man made a winning. Then it leaked out that they'd paid for the grant in cash, Hatfield being suspicious of paper, and that the reason for the denials was because Hatfield figured he might be held up before he could get it out of the country. It was said he'd cached the money somewheres, which fitted in with what folks knew of him. Then one day two riders, Jarret and Blake, came packing in old man Hatfield's remainders and the corpse of a Mexican, one Perez Gonzales, who had one time been a bandit. They had come up on four Mexicans that had downed Hatfield in a canyon a mile back of his house. They'd got Perez, but the rest got away. There was a hole there, they says, that had been covered with a rock, and a couple of thousand dollars in bills scattered round, which they collected and fetched back. Curious folks went out to view the hole and even found a few more bills in the brush. It was said that the other three Mexicans had made off with the rest. A deed from Hatfield, acknowledged before Judge

Cullen, conveying the grant to Girard and Comstock, had been put on record up in the capitol a couple of weeks prior to Hatfield's demise, it came out later. Folks up thataway had discussed it, but it's a long jaunt from Salito to the capitol, four hundred-odd miles, and the news hadn't got back to Salito. But folks down Salito way knew it anyhow from these rumors. Of course Hatfield's estate contested it and proclaimed the deed had been forged. But the whole countryside had believed one way too long to change its mind. Girard and Comstock acquired the San Estano Grant for a couple of thousand in loose bills and whatever they paid to Judge Cullen, Jarret and Blake. It was talk that put that steal over."

He twisted a cigarette before resuming.

"There's a tale going round that Langford is owing Slaven so heavy that he put up a deed to the Bar Z Bell to cover his loans before he left on the drive, to be recorded only in case something happens to him. That leads me to believe something is about ripe to happen to him. Coulard has Art Langford's signature on many a scrap of paper, including notes, the amounts of which

could easy be raised. A deed to the Bar Z Bell could be recorded in the event of his demise, and it would be just what every one in the Rolavi Sink would be expecting. It appears that I've been elected as the instrument to bring this mishap to pass."

"You!" she exclaimed. "How?"

"There's another little tale going round that since they've made war on sheep and sheepmen I've declared war on cows and cowmen, and that I'm feeding the whole tribe of Tasao on rustled beef. A few head of cows come drifting down out of the Palo Verdes on and off. There's been a number of head shot down, a few of 'em partway dressed out as if whoever was doing the job was scared off and left the critter. A dozen riders have run across such plants. It's stirred folks considerable. Then it's noised abroad that I'm hostile toward Langford on account of that raid on my sheep and have promised to shoot him down on sight the second he sets foot inside Spanish Acres. Don't you see where that's leading? It's aimed to narrow it down to a personal combat between your brother and me. Coulard knows now that raids on my sheep, laws passed to

harass me and so on, won't discourage me to the point where I'll sell Spanish Acres. If I won't sell, he figures, it's likely my heirs would jump at the chance to sell cheap. He's planning to give my heirs the earliest possible opportunity to name their price. With my demise coming on top of all that's transpired prior to this, added to the certainty of a range war with the Bar Z Bell and this tax burden that's been saddled onto Spanish Acres, it would be a right unattractive proposition for any prospective purchaser. So Coulard is hoping that I'll be the one to go down in this personal affray between Langford and me. If it turns out to be the other way round, and that I should get him, why Coulard would console himself by recording the deed to the Bar Z Bell in Slaven's name, so his hand wouldn't show, and he'd see to it that folks was so incensed against me that I could scarcely live hereabouts, but would either get shot down in my turn or be made to stand trial. It's that same equation — one of us killed and the other one blamed with the killing. Now it would be somewhat more satisfactory for both Langford and me to go right on living instead of getting ourselves killed

just to accommodate Coulard. As soon as ever he gets back you tell him this, and show him where all this talk is pointing. Otherwise, just the second he hears it, he'll charge right out on the war trail."

She nodded, calculating time and distance.

"The trail crew should be getting back in two weeks," she estimated. "I'll ride out to Quenemaro and wait for him there."

"If you can manage to do that," Hollister said, "then you can tell him just exactly what line of talk will be purveyed to him as soon as he lands at Coulard's. Tell him why. Give him everything you and me have been considering about Coulard and Slaven. The idea will be too new to take hold of him first off, but it'll keep turning over in his mind. Talk to him hard and fast and earnest. Tell him you can prove it if only he'll ride out to Spanish Acres with you and talk it all over with me. Tell him that I'd rather give him Spanish Acres than to have a falling-out with you. Then when he hears the talk that'll be handed to him, almost word for word as you've predicted it would be, it will fall flat, sort of, and set him to studying."

"Yes, I'll ride out to Quenemaro and meet him," she agreed.

"Meanwhile, I'm planning to touch off a back-fire against Coulard," he said. "When it comes to a head, a word from you might help swing it. I'll tell Sutanak to give a certain signal to the Tasaos, and whenever it's launched on the range it means that I'm wanting to see you real urgent. Will you come a-running whenever a Tasao turns up with that message?"

"Yes," she said. "Whenever I get it, I'll come."

XVI

The two burros plodded dispiritedly under the persistent urgings of the old desert rat.

"You, Jennie! You poor creepin' terrapin," he admonished. "If you don't move out o' that crawl we'll never make our destination. I marked our progress by lining up that dead yucca flower stalk with a juniper snag on yonder ridge, and for the last half-hour I believe we've actually been losin' ground. Step along!"

The cool of the desert morning was superseded by suffocating heat as the sun swung high, then by the white blistering glare of noonday, but the old prospector held on. Little shimmering heat waves blurred the vision and lent the illusion that the whole landscape was in motion, throbbing with a quivering undulation. A white alkali flat, bare of all vegetation save for a few straggling clusters of greasewood, reflected the sun's rays with a devastating intensity. On the far side of it a lake, placid and unruffled, stretched away into the distance. From its surface emanated a vague

mist that magnified a band of range horses. A cluster of junipers assumed the aspect of a lofty grove on the distant shores of the lake.

Whetzel advanced; the waters receded. The distant, stately grove became an assortment of squat, dwarfed junipers in the immediate foreground. The horses stood facing him, one of them pawing the ground and snorting, then whirled and circled off to one side when he had advanced to within a hundred yards of their stand.

These mirage effects were a part of Whetzel's everyday existence, as commonplace as sagebrush and alkali, and, unless the effect included some particularly striking characteristic, the phenomenon failed to elicit his interest. Now, however, he commented.

" If I was parched for a drink, I'd likely resent that tall stately grove in the distance reverting into a cluster of dusty junipers close at hand, and feel downright outraged to discover them horses careening on a parched and burnt-up flat when a minute past they appeared to be standing knee-deep in cool water. Maddenin' — that's what it would be," he speculated. " Now there's

Coulard. For years back he's been a-following a mirage, only to have it back off from him, and some object in the immediate foreground, like Hollister, for instance, a-holding him off it. A thirsty man will keep groping on ahead. Nothing short of death will deter him from trailin' on to try and catch up with that water and slake his thirst; and I reckon nothing short o' that will deter Coulard from tracking after that mirage of his'n. Things has been too quiet for the past month to appear natural. Wallace's visit to Judge Sloane fixed it in Coulard's mind that another general raid would bring Government intervention to protect Tasao property and would help Hollister rather than hurt him. But he's only resting. And while he's resting is a good time for Hollister to lay low and not wag an ear above the brush. There's likely several first-rate assassins loitering round pining to line their sights on him. Just as long as Coulard is alive Hollister can't have no assurance that he is due to go on living for the next sixty seconds. There's only one way out, as far as Coulard is —"

He broke off to croon the chorus of his song:

"His horse went back to the wild bunch,
His horse went back to the wild bunch,
His horse went back to the wild bunch,
A dead man's horse in the hills."

"And there'll be one dead jackass on this alkali bottom if you don't toddle along right smart," he threatened the rearmost burro. "Yes, sir! There's just one way to cure Coulard. That way is to effect the gentleman's demise. Nothing short of that will answer."

His way led toward an expanse of naked sand.

"Sand Crawl in the foreground," he announced.

The plodding cavalcade entered the stretch of blistering sand, its surface corrugated and patterned with delicately traced wavelets that had been tossed up by the last desert blow. Topographically, Sand Crawl was the ultimate in impermanency. Its landscape was altered by every considerable wind. The track of man or beast would be obliterated within an hour if left on a surface that was exposed to the slightest breeze. To-day there was not even a ripple of air astir to agitate these restless sands — only that still, appalling heat. Whetzel crossed a line of moc-

casin tracks and his eye followed them to a steeply pitching sand cone. It's treadmill flanks were traversed by similar lines of tracks in parallel tracings where the wearer of the moccasins had made a dozen pilgrimages round the hill at varying elevations, as if he searched minutely for some object.

After an indefinite period of traveling Whetzel came out into a little flat of some five acres in extent. Various articles of equipment, consisting chiefly of skin water bags, were scattered about. There were several skin pouches containing corn that had been dried on the cob when not quite fully matured, then shelled, several pouches of dried meat, a score of blankets.

Whetzel unpacked his two burros, the chief part of the load consisting of water bags similar to those of the Tasaos. He watered the animals sparingly by pouring part of the contents of one of the bags into a shallow gold pan, then led them to the edge of the flat and started them out on their back track.

"You ramble on back outside till I pick you up on the back trip," he advised. "Locate you a sagebresh to gnaw on to offset your appetite so's

you won't be tempted to slip back here and rifle my outfit of biscuits. I'll work you over something frightful if you put me on a dried meat an' corn ration with the Tasaos. Scoot!"

The burros scooted, taking their back track toward food and water.

The blazing copper ball of the sun cooled to a glowing crimson sphere as it touched the horizon. A scarlet sunset paled into a billowing, fluted effect of gray and gold; then the desert night descended swiftly. Moccasined feet padded noiselessly in the yielding sand, giving no notice of the wearers' approach until shadowy forms glided into the flat. A score of Tasaos gathered there. No fuel was available for a night fire.

Whetzel scooped a hollow in the hot sand for his hips and shoulders, rolled up in his single blanket and retired for the night. Every Tasao bedded in similar fashion. The heat-laden atmosphere of the day was soon dissipated by the chill tang of the desert night. The sands retained their heat for a longer time but eventually the warmth departed and they chilled. Whetzel was wakened, shivering within the folds of his single

blanket. He burrowed deeper into the sand and meditated upon the matter in hand.

The present expedition had penetrated Sand Crawl in search of the remains of John Gillfoyle, whose killing at the hands of Coulard and Slaven had been witnessed by three Tasaos some six months before. Sutanak had been absent from the reservation upon the return of the two, and a party of Tasaos had headed forthwith to the hills above Pueblo Tasao to sound their tom-toms. This, coupled with the fact that the witnessing two had appropriated unto themselves all of the slain man's personal effects that appealed to their cupidity, lent to the affair an aspect which had led Sutanak to make no mention of it whatsoever to any white man until he had confided the matter to Hollister some months after the occurrence. The aged chief had decided that if the matter was broached to the authorities it would result inevitably in the conviction of the three Tasaos. This was the third general search of Sand Crawl by the Tasaos at Hollister's request, each one staged just after a big blow had drifted the shifting sands about.

"And just what good will come of finding

his remainders, anyway?" Whetzel pondered. "Coulard could kill a man on the streets of Rolavi with every soul in town looking on and still come off free; so it's a thousand to one this couldn't be cinched on him anyway. All we've got to go on it is a pried-off boot heel, a disrupted jackknife and the story of three Tasaos that rifled the dead man's effects. Not a chance."

This view of the matter he expressed to Hollister when the latter rode into the camp an hour before daylight.

"There's only one way to convict Coulard," Whetzel prophesied in conclusion. "That's to kill him first and convict him at some later date. Even if the Tasaos turn up this party's remainders it won't help out any to speak of. And while I think of it, just what's the idea of you ranting down here in person and layin' yourself open to getting bushwhacked any minute?"

"I came down at night and will go back the same way," Hollister explained. "I wonder how Coulard would feel if he knew that it's fixed so he'll never get his claws onto Spanish Acres even if something does happen to me. Matilda Owen, me being her nephew by marriage — her mar-

riage, not mine — and her thinking right well of her nephew, turned Spanish Acres to me at just what her brother, Cole Briggs, paid for it; no initial payment down and time aplenty to pay for it in. But she knows now that Coulard, not Langford, who she'd suspected previous, was responsible for Briggs' death, and she'll see to it that Spanish Acres never gets into his hands. If anything did happen to me, Coulard would be in just exactly the same fix he's been facing for upwards of two years now."

"That would upset him no doubt," said Whetzel. "But all the same, Son, I wouldn't go and get myself killed just to play a good joke like that on Coulard. I'd map out some plan to play it low-down on him and go right on living yourself."

"That," said Hollister, "is just what I am planning. Did you ever stop to think that if a man knows every detail of something up to a certain point and nothing beyond that point, his very knowledge is apt to handicap him serious?"

"Um," Whetzel remarked noncommittally. "As how in particular?"

"Coulard knows every detail of what hap-

pened in Sand Crawl up to the time that Tasao cayuse nickered and put him and Slaven out of here on the run."

"He'd ort to," said the old man, "provided his memory is anyways retentive. Well?"

"Well, he don't know a scratch of what happened subsequent to that," Hollister asserted. "He don't know for sure whether that nicker emanated from a stray mustang or from a rode horse, or if it was rode, how many others there might have been along, how much they saw or who all they were. I expect he's wondered a considerable on that score. It's our play to let him get news of what did happen."

"And a lot it would worry him to hear it," the old man scoffed. "That three Tasaos had seen it at long range and then purloined the victim's effects. He'd have a long hearty laugh over that, Coulard would."

"Only that ain't what he'll hear," Hollister explained. "Which brings us back to the point I was remarking on, that knowing part of a thing may handicap a man. If some one up and recites it to him in every detail something that he knows for a fact and everything all correct to a hair,

up as far as he knows it, and then relates the portion that he doesn't know about, he'll naturally assume that that part is similarly correct as to detail."

"Now, Son," said Whetzel, "I'm beginning to get your drift. The old proverb relating that it's only the truth what hurts falls down flat in this instance. The truth wouldn't even puncture the skin, but a real clever untruth, manufactured for the purpose, might be downright ruinous. It's not what did happen in Sand Crawl subsequent to that nicker, but what didn't happen that will set him to wringing his tail."

"Something like that," Hollister agreed. "Did you ever stop to think that any man accused of something he knows they'll never cinch on him will always submit to trial graceful? If he's dead certain in advance that the thing is all cut and dried — framed to have his neck stretched — he'll either run or put up a fight before he'll stand trial."

"And it would be a right futile proceeding to bring Coulard to trial. On the other hand, if he can be stampeded into putting up a fight, or to get in a hurry and maybe overplay his hand, then

down goes his meat house," Whetzel amplified. " You're dead right, Son. It wouldn't even ruffle him to hear what did happen here. But, when he hears what didn't happen, in all its harassing details, it's apt to shrivel his complacency to a cinder."

" That," said Hollister, " is just what I've been thinking. It's our one best way out. If the Tasaos can locate Gillfoyle's resting place in this shifting sand, so much the better. If not, why we'll proceed without it. Coulard has been promoting talk that's calculated to rouse folks against me. I'm going to promote a little chat that will rouse Coulard to act against himself to the point where he displays his hand in the open."

XVII

A STRANGER, short and blocky, with hard shifty blue eyes and a stubble of red beard, sat in Coulard's and listened to the growing storm of hostility against Hollister. The allegiance of all these men was enlisted on the side of cows and cowmen, solidly against the man who was reported to have threatened to flood the Rolavi Sink with sheep, with Tasao herders and under Government protection, to the point where cow outfits would be forced out of business.

This individual presently accosted Coulard as that gentleman moved behind the bar, gauging the force of the hostility, occasionally voicing a mild word counselling moderation; very mild, however, just sufficient to let it be known as a matter of record that he was opposed to violence.

"And what do you think of all this ruckus?" the stranger inquired.

Coulard regarded him before answering.

"It's bad for my business," he informed. "I'd like to see it ended, this turmoil, and an outfit

with a payroll operating Spanish Acres. Sheep or cows — it's all one with me."

"If you knowed what I know, you'd maybe like to see these terriers ride over and go through with their program," the man predicted.

"Just what do you know that would affect me thataway?" Coulard asked, scrutinizing the stranger.

"My name's Clawson — and I'm needing a grubstake," the man returned noncommittally.

He looked it, Coulard reflected. His chaps were patched, his shirt tattered. The upper of one boot was ripped loose from the sole.

"Well, Clawson, I never turn a man away broke. Drink as much as you please for to-night — and take this when you leave." He slid a five-dollar gold piece on to the bar.

Clawson regarded the coin, grinned amiably and declined it.

"I'm needing a grubstake for the winter," he declared. "Five hundred would run me."

Coulard shrugged.

"Suppose now that the sheepman knew that you was behind all his grief — out to acquire this layout of his, and that he had you framed seven

ways from the deuce?" Clawson asked. "What would you say?"

"I'd say that he was mistaken about my having any ambitions thataway," said Coulard; "and that you was even worse mistaken about anything he can do."

Clawson leaned across the bar, lowering his voice.

"What if he knows just what happened in Sand Crawl a spell back?"

"Well," Coulard returned mildly. "Just what did happen?"

"A horse nickered," said Clawson. "Does that recall anything to your mind?"

Coulard laughed and wagged a negative head.

"Why would a horse nickering in Sand Crawl recall anything to my mind?" he inquired curiously.

"Maybe," said Clawson, "maybe you kill folks so frequent that it takes considerable to refresh your memory about a killing if it's a few months in the past."

"No, I don't kill folks often," said Coulard. "But when I do I recall the event without effort."

"Then it won't be difficult for you to recall that you and that big buck over there asleep in his chair killed a party named Gillfoyle in Sand Crawl," Clawson informed. "I happened to see you."

"That's very entertaining," said Coulard.

"Ain't it?" Clawson agreed. "That big strangler over yonder ain't so sleepy as he looks, is he? And quick and strong — say, I wouldn't want him to clamp down on me. After you'd caught Gillfoyle's gun, the big one tore him from the saddle and squeezed the very bones flat in him. That shriek he emitted — I can hear it yet. Then he broke his knife blade in pryin' off the heel of the dead party's boot and shoved his foot through the stirrup. Just then my pony up and nickered and the pair of you took out on the run."

"Neat little tale," Coulard commented. "Which, if it was true, would get you into trouble. Don't you figure that the easiest way to be shut of you wouldn't be to supply you with money so's you could go on living and wagging your jaw, but would be to have you killed inside the next few minutes? I could, easy, you know."

"Dead easy. That's just what I do know," Clawson conceded.

"And if there was any sense to what you're talking, if I had been mixed into that kind of a deal, that's just what I would do — have you killed."

Clawson grinned.

"Dead men tell no tales, so they say, and it would likely apply in my case," he said. "So you wouldn't get to listen to my tale if I was to die."

"You've told me what you know now," Coulard declared.

Clawson laughed scornfully.

"Why, I haven't told you a thing but what you already knew. That was no news to you. It's what I know that you don't that I was going to trade on."

"By taking my price to refrain from selling this tale to Hollister," Coulard suggested.

"He don't need what I've got to tell," Clawson stated.

"Neither do I," Coulard returned.

"Oh, I know how you think you're sitting," Clawson grinned. "You could get away with

cutting your grandmother's throat in this hole. Folks are against law and against having any one tried. It's every man for himself hereabouts. Without asking you to admit what I told you I saw, if you was brought to trial for it, just what would it come to? Nothing! Don't you suppose I know that?"

"You seem," said Coulard, "to know a great deal. If it all amounts to nothing, why should I be concerned?"

"Now," said Clawson, "we're getting somewhere near together. That's just what I was aiming to tell you — in return for a grubstake. I can draw down that much for being a witness for Hollister, but there's reasons why I can't do that. I'm telling you flat, I ain't able to do it, and won't, whether you pay me or not, so you see I ain't trying to crowd you. I've got to head south and stay there."

"You can start any time," Coulard pointed out.

"You're framed, solid, up to your ears," Clawson said. "I'll make you a proposition. I can't be any worse off than I am, even if you don't go through with it. I'll tell you what I

know and you be the judge of whether it's worth five hundred."

"I can't lose at that game," Coulard said. "And you're a real interesting talker. Do go on. But I advise you — lying to me is apt to prove fatal."

"First off, let me tell you that Hollister knows, the way things are hereabouts, that he couldn't get you tried fair. There's hardly been one big cowman ever convicted in the Territory for killing some party, or hiring some one to do his killing, or what not, and in this Rolavi country especial folks still believe in playing the game of hands off and to hell with the law. But this play of his is different again. The Federal authorities are interested in seeing his arrangement with the Tasaos go through. It'll help clear the skirts of the Indian Bureau for the storm of adverse sentiment that flew round about the tribe's being crowded off by Porter. Hollister has deeded it back to the tribe. They'll advertise that fact aplenty throughout the nation, that the bureau has rectified a wrong. A Federal trial is some different from a local affair or in the territorial courts. That's what Hollister is planning

for you — a Federal trial at Fort Ciradua, with the authorities dead set against you already. He's had his own men and one or two deputy marshals on your trail since long before he come into the Sink himself."

"Then what?" Coulard asked as the narrator paused.

"There was four of us come up across the Rio Tasao Canyon by way of the Mescalano Trail the day you and Slaven got Gillfoyle," Clawson said. "We was riding fast because the Mescalano stage had been held up off south and the driver and shotgun guard killed. The description of the four men who done it tallied with our looks pretty close, so we was expecting that maybe some hard-riding outfit would have crossed over and be waiting to look for us where the trail tops out on this side. They wasn't, and we headed out across Sand Crawl. When we heard you three coming, and us not looking for company, we deployed ourselves flat behind a sand crest and saw what I told you. That night we headed west and crossed Solado Arroya into the breaks. One of those other three that rode with me that day drifted north later and hired out as a gun hand to

Hollister. He told him about it. He's collected the other two. They're in the clear on all past history. I ain't, though I thought I was until I met one of the boys out near Hollister's plant last night and he told me how bad I was wanted at Fort Ciradua myself. Naturally, I'm not going to turn up at the Fort as no witness."

"No," said Coulard. "I wouldn't. Who are these other three men?"

"No names," said Clawson, grinning and shaking his head. "That wasn't in our contract. They used to string with me, and might some day again. Anyway, your killers couldn't get to 'em. Hollister's hang-out could stand off an army. Hollister knows he couldn't have you arrested offhand. Folks are too much against such business, and you have too many friends. He's planning to have you summoned before a military outfit that'll be in to his place soon, just as a witness about what all you've heard about that raid on his sheep, and the killing of a deputy marshal. You'd go, quick enough, wouldn't you, just as a witness?"

"I might," Coulard confessed.

"And right then, instead of a witness, you'll

become a defendant accused of every crime in the calendar."

"What else would they try to hang on to me?" Coulard asked.

"Now, listen, I wasn't meaning to do any romancing, but to tell you just what I know," Clawson said. "About the rest of this here, I don't know for sure. It was told me by the party I met outside of Hollister's plant last night and who advised me not to go to Fort Ciradua. I can't vouch for it. But if you want to hear it, all right."

"I'll take a chance," Coulard returned. "Let's have it. What did he say?"

"The Briggs' estate is back of this with big money and hostile to you as the devil. There's two men primed to swear that you poisoned Briggs' stock, that they saw you plant salt and cyanide in little vats in the rock. They've got samples. Whether it was you or not, they'll swear that they saw you, and that you killed Briggs when he wouldn't get discouraged and sell Spanish Acres. The whole tribe of Tasaos will swear to a man that you sent word to them, through Garcon, when a party named Cates was

snuffed out some years back and told 'em to sound their drums to speed his departed soul."

Coulard was shaking his head in negation.

"I told you I didn't know!" Clawson asserted. "I'm just telling you what I heard — true or not. Garcon, as maybe you know, was escorted out of these parts by a marshal some time ago and is at Fort Ciradua now; as a witness against you or to get hung himself, I don't know which. Anyway, there's a new agent en route."

Coulard did know that Garcon was gone. At least, messengers he had sent to bring the agent to him had reported that Garcon's quarters on the reservation were deserted.

"And just how does Hollister propose to go at this?" Coulard asked.

"I've told you aplenty for the price you've paid me so far," Clawson said. "And my throat is dry from conversing so long; my pocket's still empty."

Coulard slid a bottle across the bar.

"You'll get your money," he said. "Even if there's no truth in all that stuff Hollister has packed his witnesses with, it's not a bad plan for me to be posted on matters ahead."

He retired to his office in the rear of the room, returned briefly and handed a packet to Clawson.

"There's your money," he said. "Now tell me."

"There ain't a whole lot more to tell," Clawson said. "Near as I got it, his plans are this: To take the county seat over to his place, account of the fact it's more populous, with three hundred-odd folks in the village. They're building a trading post there."

"Indians can't vote," said Coulard.

"No. But soldiers can. In order to make it look like the sheepmen had a fair chance to vote, you all, knowing they would be in the minority anyway, provides that any male white human inside the boundaries of Rolavi County can vote, even if he hasn't resided here but a day. He's sent to Fort Ciradua for two troops of cavalry. He'll vote them. The Government's back of it. The Territorial Governor has given Hollister deputy's papers to protect Tasao property. He can deputize all his hands, same as Slaven can deputize whoever he's inclined to. It's then he'll book you for trial and have you snatched over to Fort Ciradua."

"And just when will he get round to this?" Coulard asked.

"Any time now," Clawson prophesied. "Only this: He'll wait till the trail-herd crew comes back before he springs it. He's wanting to serve papers on Langford too."

"And what's Langford to be accused of?" Coulard inquired.

"Nothing," said Clawson. "He's wanting to get Langford on his side by pointing out to him that you're playing both ends against the middle, Langford against Hollister, aiming to acquire the Bar Z Bell too. There was a lot of such stuff. I don't recollect it all, word for word, but have told you near as I can remember. Now I'll bid you good-by. I'm setting out to put distance between me and Fort Ciradua. Adios."

"And what," said Coulard, "would you advise me to do?"

"Advise you!" Clawson exclaimed. "I ain't dispensing advice. My own case is all I can manage and each man knows his own business best. Now that you know what he's up to, you can use your own judgment. You have plenty of time. He won't spring it till Langford gets back

with the trail crew, unless he changes his mind. Thanks for the grubstake. Good-by."

Clawson departed and Coulard stroked his pointed beard and pondered. Thereafter, one or two turbulent spirits circulated through the crowd and openly suggested that they should assemble all good cowhands and ride over to sack Hollister's outfit.

"Not his sheep," they urged. "He can buy more sheep. It's him we want. He'd ought to be strung up a mile high." Sentiment was being crystallized against the man himself, superseding the more impersonal hostility against sheep on general grounds which had obtained previously.

Dad Whetzel, nodding in his chair, caught the change in sentiment and chuckled contentedly.

"It's what didn't happen that bored into him," he reflected. "Since Hollister ain't planning to swoop until the trail crew gets back, Coulard is preparing to pounce prior to that, which is what Hollister was prayin' he would do. It's all working out real neat and according to schedule."

He rose from his chair, yawned and stretched, strolled out and headed for his camp a mile out of town, where he found Clawson waiting.

XVIII

The trail-herd crew returning as a unit, its progress no longer impeded by slow-moving charges, made good time. Langford was eager to reach Rolavi Wells and learn what had occurred there during his absence. The accompanying remuda was of sufficient size to permit changing horses on the chuck wagon thrice daily if necessary. In this manner they covered nearly forty miles a day, as against an average of less than ten when on the northward way with the herd.

Eventually even this seemed slow to Langford and he pressed on alone, trading horses with cow outfits where it was feasible, purchasing a fresh mount where it was not, and leaving behind him several horses that were to be thrown into the Rolavi Remuda as it reached these various points. In this manner he covered each day at least twice the distance attained by the crew, whose pace was regulated by the chuck wagon.

During the long lonely day of hard riding his thoughts were speculating concerned with matters that might have occurred in the Rovali Sink during his absence: Hollister's ownership of Spanish Acres and the extent of his operations in stocking the grant; whether or not the sheep outfit that had invaded the Palo Verde Hills on the day of his departure had been driven forth by the Rolavi cowmen, or had been allowed to lamb its flocks there. It was not until he reached Quenemaro that he learned that the sheep, instead of being hurled back out of the Palo Verdes, had invaded the Sink itself and were firmly established in Spanish Acres, owned by Hollister. He learned, too, of the latter's arrangement with the Tasaos.

He set forth across the Rolavi Pass in no pleasant frame of mind, arriving in Rolavi at so late an hour that Coulard's place, for once in its history, was closed. He roused the proprietor and questioned him as to matters in the Sink. What he learned tended to augment rather than alleviate his black mood.

Thus it happened that a girl, following a trail that led across the Palo Verdes twenty miles from

the stage road, arrived in Quenemaro two hours after nightfall, turned her mount and pack horse over to a Mexican stable hand and retired for the night in a little adobe hotel without conversing with any one. It was not until she had breakfasted the next morning that she learned that the brother for whom she had intended to wait had passed through three days before her arrival and that the trail crew, electing to ride a double shift on this last lap of the journey, had poured through Quenemaro at dusk, bent upon making a night ride to Rolavi Wells.

Coulard, not anticipating the arrival of the trail crew for another week at the earliest, was somewhat taken aback when Langford entered. Then, learning that the crew was following some three or four days behind, he realized that this arrival fitted in most miraculously. Every cause needs a leader. The hostile sentiment against Hollister must be crystallized to the point where the men would pounce down upon him in a body, roused to a killing pitch. He had faced the necessity of appointing a leader himself. But now Langford would automatically assume that position, the rôle which Coulard had intended him

to play from the start. His absence, at a time when it had become necessary for Coulard to strike suddenly, had made an awkward break in the plans, a break that was now rectified, since Hollister too would not be expecting the arrival of Langford and the crew for some time and so would not be prepared to act at once.

His surmise in this respect was correct. The following day Langford transacted his business with Slaven and Jessup, then repaired to the bar to receive the greetings of all who entered and to hear of the developments in the Sink during his absence.

Langford stormed when he heard that his cows were being killed to feed the Tasaos; stormed still more when he heard that Hollister intended to graze his sheep on the open range, now used by Langford's and Slaven's cows, reserving Spanish Acres for winter feed for his flocks, and force the cow outfits out of business.

Coulard voiced a pacific sentiment. If there was trouble, he said, it would be bad for his business.

"Business, hell!" Langford retorted. "If this keeps up there won't be any business. What

kind of spineless toads have we got round here, anyway, to let a sheep outfit spraddle itself all over the Sink, stealing our beef to ration a tribe of Indians with. I'll take every man that'll follow me and ransack Spanish Acres from one end to the other."

Langford, like many another turbulent spirit, was a popular figure, endowed with the faculty of making bitter enemies of the few who crossed his will, fast friends of the many who did not, and cementing their allegiance. His very turbulence, coupled with the unwavering courage and stubbornness to face out anything which he started, appealed to the restless inhabitants of the Sink. Almost to a man they would follow wherever he led.

Coulard knew this, had counted upon it from the start, but he knew too, in view of governmental interest in Hollister's experiment, that any campaign which had as its object only the killing of sheep would serve to bring about intervention and probably establish Hollister's hold the more firmly. The force of this hostility must be directed against the man's person, not against his property, if it were to benefit Coulard.

He waited, moving behind the bar, hearing all that was said, gauging it, saying little himself save to insert an occasional mild bit of counsel urging moderation — waited for a certain angle of the situation to reach Langford's ears.

Presently it did, when some one remarked to the effect that Hollister had threatened to shoot Langford on sight if he should set foot inside Spanish Acres.

"I hadn't heard that he'd singled me out personal," said Langford. "That puts a different face on this thing. I'll ride out in a day or two and take a pasear through his bailiwick. If he don't look me up, I'll look for him."

Cole Webber put in a mild word of remonstrance.

"He'll shoot you down, Art. He's gave his word to that effect. I'd walk easy," Webber counselled.

Langford, however, insisted that no man could make a public utterance such as was attributed to Hollister and the challenge remain unheeded. He would ride out and accost Hollister and make him swallow his statement or act upon it.

"But you see," Webber remonstrated, "you

won't have a chance to accost him. He'll just shoot you on sight, like he's threatened. That sheep outfit has killed three men already and shot up several more. They start shooting, not talking. You'd just get plain murdered without even a dog's chance for a parley."

"Then I'll do some shooting myself," Langford retorted. "Do you think I'll let a sheepman make talk like this and not take up his challenge?"

"But it ain't what you'd rightly call a man-to-man challenge," Moss interposed. "It's more of an invite to come out and get yourself shot in the back. No, Art; I wouldn't."

"He wouldn't do that," Langford predicted. "He knows a play like that would stir up folks to the point where they'd lynch him."

"Yes. I reckon the boys would swarm out and sack his hang-out and string him up a mile high if he did do it," Webber said. "But you wouldn't get any whole lot of satisfaction out of it after you was a long time dead."

So it went on. Coulard, behind the bar, listened and estimated the force of the hostile sentiment that was being generated in the hearts of

those whose allegiance lay on the side of cows and cowmen.

Slaven blinked sleepily in his chair against the wall. Any symptom of mental activity was successfully shrouded behind those half-closed lids. One would have pronounced him as torpid mentally as he seemed physically. In common with the other newly made county officials, Slaven uttered an occasional word of remonstrance against the rising storm of hostility. Moss, Webber, Judge Sloane and Coulard counselled moderation, voicing a hope that the situation could be met without violence, settled perhaps in an orderly, lawful manner. These remonstrances, however, were sufficiently mild as to be innocuous.

The trail crew should come pouring down from the Rolavi Pass in a short while now, two days at the most, and then the lid would blow off, it was freely predicted.

Whetzel, nodding in his chair, presently rose and made for his camp. There he scrawled a message in the light of a brush fire. He whistled. A dark shape appeared from a near-by arroya, took the message and faded into the gloom. A moment later the hoof beats of a running horse

sounded in the night. There would be no saving of mounts, for Tasaos were stationed at five-mile intervals to relay messages over the sixty-odd miles that separated Hollister from Rolavi Wells. The developments since Clawson's conversation with Coulard had been conveyed to him in this fashion. It was near midnight when the old desert rat dispatched the message. The last Tasao to relay it arrived within sight of the old Castinado mansion at daylight.

Hollister, having breakfasted early, stood upon the veranda with Farrel.

" It's working out nice, Bob. Clawson's yarn has caused Coulard to speed up his plans. He figures it's imperative to effect my demise prior to the arrival of the alleged cavalry. Then, with me dead, and the sentiment of the Sink hostile and solid against me, he's setting pretty again. Only now he'll appoint one of his own crew to fan things to white heat and lead the fight against me, instead of having Langford assume that rôle, as he'd intended, because he'll be a little apprehensive about marking time till Langford comes back with the trail crew. The mob will offer to hold a parley, likely, and there'll be several in

the crowd, unbeknownst to the rest, that's primed to shoot me if I show my head for a pow-wow. Then they'll ride off and let the rest of you off. If I don't fall for that and show myself, they'll offer us amnesty and agree to take the whole of us into Rolavi for trial for killing beef, only they'll see to it that I never reach there. And of course, this not being exactly in accordance with law and order, why the county officials, after recording mild protests against it, will stay home. They won't be along. That's the way things are shaping from Dad's last message. Most any time now we can expect to hear that they're all starting."

He reflected further that Sarah Lee would be meeting Langford in Quenemaro in a few days, explaining to him how matters stood. He was glad that Langford was out of it. Then the Tasao courier arrived with Whetzel's message and he learned that Langford, instead of being out of it, was distinctly into it. In that particular, fate had played into Coulard's hands. There was still time, possibly, for Sarah Lee to reach Langford in Rolavi or to come here before her brother arrived at the head of the hostiles, where-

upon she could go out and hold a parley with him and perhaps make him see the true state of affairs. With this in mind he sent for Sutanak, and within a brief space a signal was being relayed across the range. Within the hour every Tasao in Spanish Acres knew that the girl's presence was desired at the Castinado hacienda. One Indian who chanced to be the closest to the Jessup place rode there. Another covered the twenty miles from his post in the northeastern corner of Spanish Acres to the Bar Z Bell in two hours, only to learn that the girl was not there. As the hours passed without any return signal announcing that the girl was on her way, Hollister knew that his first uneasy surmise was correct — that Sarah Lee had already crossed over the Palo Verdes and had thus missed her brother. There was, of course, the probability that she would follow back at once and seek him out in Rolavi."

Presently he essayed a grin.

" At any rate, I won't be here to meet him," he said. " There's some consolation in that."

He was in for it now, he reflected, and must make the best of it while waiting for events to

shape themselves. Even in case of a meeting between Langford and himself, there was still the chance that they might hold a parley before hostilities began, and that matters might be arranged between them.

XIX

Coulard also had foreseen such a contingency. His original plan — made when he had assumed that both principals were in ignorance of the actual state of affairs — to let the matter run its course as a personal issue between the two men and their respective factions, was no longer feasible. With what Hollister already knew, as detailed by Clawson, and in view of the fact that he was anxious to acquaint Langford with the matter and so endeavor to secure his coöperation, a meeting of the two would be highly dangerous. Coulard, therefore, had no intention that any such meeting should occur. There were far better ways.

Somewhere around ten o'clock on Langford's third night in town a man accosted him and drew him aside. He listened to what the stranger had to say, then shook his head.

"You one of Hollister's men?" he demanded.

The fellow nodded, glancing about uneasily.

"Then tell him this," Langford instructed.

"That I'll look him up when I take the notion, not just at his notion. I'll set the time myself. He's spread his conversation broadcast that he'll shoot me any time I set foot in his bailiwick. Tell him I'll be over directly and camp inside Spanish Acres till he comes personally to run me out. Tell him to come a-shooting."

He would have said more, much more, for his thoughts whirled confusedly from too frequent libations of raw liquor, but the other interrupted.

"I thought you might be hostile, so I told Coulard first. He'll tell you just what I have." Curious eyes were regarding the pair. "See; he's motioning to you now."

Langford made his way to Coulard's enclosed office in the rear of the room. The stranger strolled out, mounted his horse, fingered a roll of currency with some satisfaction and was seen no more in the Rolavi Sink.

Coulard addressed Langford earnestly.

"Here's the chance you've been wanting for a lifetime. That fellow told you, I expect. Hollister is ready to sell Spanish Acres for what he's got in it, which is cheap, I understand, and get out."

"Then why don't he ride in and see me?" Langford demanded. "Instead of asking me to dangle out to Sand Vats to see him? And why this sudden notion to sell?"

"He's apprehensive about showing himself in Rolavi, the way feeling is running so high against him," Coulard said. "I don't blame him for that. And he's about come to the end of his string, so he's wanting to sell."

"How did he come to the end of his string?" Langford insisted upon knowing. His head was clearing somewhat. "I thought he was running fine."

Coulard passed him a drink.

"I do know this for a fact," Coulard said. "The Government has called off this experiment of his with the Tasaos, account of adverse sentiment, and ordered the tribe back to the reservation. They did this much for Hollister, so's his loss wouldn't be big. They bought his sheep for the Tasaos and they're going to move 'em south of the Rio Tasao and run them on the reservation. That leaves Hollister with Spanish Acres and nothing to do with it, a big payroll on his hands, a heavy annual tax — which last can be recalled

with your owning it — and hostility running so high against him that his life is real insecure hereabouts. I wouldn't wonder but what he's ready to sell and get out. I'd like right well to see this thing settled for all time to come. If he'll sell at any halfway decent figure I'll lend you the money, with both Spanish Acres and the Bar Z Bell as security. I'll have Slaven ride out with you and close this thing up before he alters his mind."

He passed Langford another drink and interrupted as the owner of the Bar Z Bell voiced an objection.

"You could take a bunch with you, as a bodyguard, sort of, but I don't think it's wise. He might shy off and not meet you, and then change his mind, but if you're afraid it's a plant —"

Langford scoffed at this suggestion.

"And then, too, he wouldn't be no sich fool, Hollister wouldn't, as to go at it like that," Coulard declared. "Why, he couldn't get out of this country alive if he did that. I'm dead anxious to have things all settled and avoid this row that seems due to come off. It won't do no harm to ride out and see. I've already had your

horses brung round back so you can get off without causing talk. I'll call Slaven."

They rode hard. Sand Vats was a water hole in the northwestern extremity of Spanish Acres, a trifle less than fifteen miles eastward along the base of the hills from Rolavi. Whenever Langford, his head clearing a bit from the ride through the air, voiced a suggestion as to the futility of this night journey, Slaven reassured him, stating that it was, at least, too good a lead to pass up without investigation. He frequently passed Langford a bottle.

"When a man's already got a skinful aboard, like you have, he needs a little jolt every so often to help keep him up," he explained.

In a trifle over an hour and a half from the start they rode up to the water hole at Sand Vats. Langford, his horse a half-length in the lead, peered ahead for some sign of a camp, his every faculty alert. His hand dropped to his gun.

Then Slaven shot him in the back. Three shots sounded in such swift succession as to almost roll into one. Langford had half-dragged his gun from its holster, but his nerveless fingers relaxed. He sagged limply over the pommel and slid side-

wise from the saddle as his horse plunged ahead. Slaven, without dismounting, wheeled his horse and headed swiftly back toward Rolavi Wells.

Coulard's rear office was equipped with a massive door and thick adobe walls, designed to deaden all sound so that the uproar in the main room would not distract the attention of those who transacted business there; also they effectually silenced all sounds from within. This sanctuary was forbidden to all but a few. Langford, Webber and Slaven, of all those in the Sink, were the only men who could invade it except upon direct invitation. It was Slaven's habit to spend some time there each night.

Shortly after Langford's departure Coulard reëntered the office. He remained for an hour. When he came forth he wandered restlessly, a distinct departure from habit, moving from game to game, wandering aimlessly from one point to another. Once he was observed to shake his head.

Cole Webber then entered the office. He, too, remained for more than an hour. When he emerged he seemed detached and preoccupied, scarcely hearing the words that were addressed to him. Coulard had quieted down, but now he rose

and resumed his post behind the bar. He glanced at his watch. It was nearing one o'clock. Langford had departed at ten. Coulard lowered his voice and addressed two Bar Z Bell riders, confiding to them that Langford had ridden away with one of Hollister's men. He acquainted them with the purpose. He consulted his watch again, shaking his head.

"I don't like it, some way," he said. "Slaven and me tried to stop him, but you know how headstrong Art is. He just surged on out. It's likely all right. He's been gone over an hour."

He had, as a matter of fact, departed almost three hours before, but none had noted the time of his going.

Coulard again entered his office. The story spread. Webber gave it as his opinion that Hollister would not be enough of a fool as to use that means to lure Langford out to Sand Vats for any sinister purpose.

"Still — he knows that with Langford out of the way, his troubles would be largely over," he said.

"Would they?" one man demanded truculently. "They'd only just be beginning if Lang-

ford was got out of the way in that fashion. This country wouldn't be big enough to hold the man that did it."

Coulard appeared in the door of the office as if just on the point of emerging. He half turned his head and nodded as if in answer to a question from some one within. Then, slowly, he pulled the door shut, remaining inside. A trifle after one o'clock he came forth with Slaven.

"It's likely all right," Slaven said, in answer to a question. "I don't like the way it come up, just exactly; but no use to worry about it. Art can look after himself."

He shrugged the matter aside.

At two o'clock the trail crew, having elected to leave the chuck wagon behind on the other side of the pass and ride a double hitch to reach Rolavi Wells, struck the base of the hills. Twenty strong, they urged their jaded horses into one last spurt and roared down upon the town. Wild exultant whoops mingled with the rumble of hoofs and the bark of guns as they made their triumphant homecoming, flung from their horses before Coulard's and swarmed into the place. Friend greeted friend with boisterous whacks or

with quiet nods, each after his own fashion. Some cursed one another affectionately, declaring that it had been their one great hope never to set eyes upon such a misshapen countenance again. There was a deafening uproar of banter and rough horseplay. Bottles and glassware tinkled and crashed at the bar. With the greater part of a summer's wages in their pockets, the riders of Rolavi were aching to spend it. A wild week loomed ahead. After that period of relaxation they would be marshalled once again in the saddle to commence the work of combing the cows from the Palo Verdes and moving them down to the winter range in the Sink. Some of the higher peaks of the Palo Verdes were already a glare of white from early snows. The work of gathering the cows must start soon. But until it did start Rolavi Wells would howl. Dusty from a long hard ride, they waited not to wash, but started their spree forthwith. Bit by bit, the returned riders heard the same reports that had greeted Langford upon his arrival. Indignation ran riot through the throng.

Mexican stable hands had been routed out of bed to care for the tied mounts at the hitch rails,

to feed and water them, unsaddle and throw them into the corrals at the livery barn. To-night no man of them all but would begrudge the time required to care for his own horse. The night wore on. There were frequent calls for Langford, but Langford did not come.

Toward morning the crowd began to thin. The men were tired from riding a double shift, having covered almost ninety miles, then carousing for the rest of the night. They dropped off, a few at a time, as gray dawn showed in the east. After all, there were other days and nights to come. They sought their beds.

When but a few were left, Slaven declared that while he was not actually worrying about Langford, any to speak of, still the fact remained that he had not come back. He might have had an accident with his horse or something, and Slaven believed that he'd take a pasear out Sand Vats way and have a look around. Several who had acquired some sleep prior to the arrival of the trail crew volunteered to accompany him.

By ten o'clock in the morning a number of roistering souls were awake and craving to alleviate the parched sensation that assailed mouths

and throats. A dozen or more had foregathered at Coulard's when Slaven's party came riding in with its grim tidings. The whole camp was awake within a very few minutes. The crowd was relatively quiet now, vastly more dangerous than when roistering during the preceding night. A consultation was held to determine what steps were to be taken in notifying the dead man's sister. A rider from the Bar Z Bell announced that the girl had set forth from the home ranch some days before, declaring her intention of riding north of the Palo Verdes for a somewhat extended period. Such excursions on her part were frequent, her absences sometimes of long duration. None knew where to reach her. There was but one thing to do. Inside of two hours, as soon as Mexican laborers could complete the necessary work, Langford was consigned to his last resting place beside old Tom Langford and those cousins and uncles who had gone down in the feud with Porter.

Some of the men made straight from this brief service to the boarding-barn corrals and set about catching and saddling their mounts. The rest repaired to Coulard's.

"Well, we might as well be starting," one man stated as he tossed off a hasty drink.

The others nodded.

"Boys, wait a spell," Slaven advised. "I'll do this all regular, get out a warrant for Hollister's arrest and we'll try him here."

"We'll try him just wherever we find him," a voice replied. "You went out to bring him in oncet, they tell me, but didn't bring him back. This time there'll be no slip."

Some forty men rode from Rolavi Wells. They did not hasten, but jogged at an easy trot, saving their mounts, for a ride of sixty-odd miles lay before them and there was no need of haste.

A man watched this departure through his glasses from a distant ridge. He touched a match to a pile of brush and the smoke rose from it. Other eyes, watching from a gap some miles removed, observed it. Other signal smokes sprang up at spots that were observable from still other selected points, but obscured by various ranges of hills from the view of those who rode from Rolavi Wells. The fires were small, soon extinguished. The party had covered less than five miles before Hollister knew of its departure.

The details he could not know until later. He had no knowledge of the arrival of the trail crew or of Langford's fate. Langford, he presumed, rode at the head of the party.

"Anyway," Hollister said. "I'll try and arrange not to be here and meet him."

At that moment a girl, having waked in Quenemaro to discover that the brother for whom she had intended to wait had crossed through three days before, covered the last lap of her sixty-mile ride across the Palo Verdes and rode into Rolavi Wells. The little baked town seemed unnaturally quiet instead of roaring as might be expected upon the return of the trail crew. There were no horses at the hitch rails. She stopped before a house on the veranda of which sat a Mexican woman who had once been a house servant at the Bar Z Bell, later an inmate of one of the fandango resorts, and at present the lawful wife of the burly foreman of the Three Strike Mine.

The Mexican woman crossed herself, rolling her eyes expressively as the girl drew rein before her, thus deepening the uneasy apprehensions that had persistently weighed upon Sarah Lee

since her hasty departure from Quenemaro at daylight.

"Tell me," she said; and the mine foreman's woman told her, the narrative interspersed with many protestations of good will and condolence.

Sarah Lee dismounted and sat upon the one step that led to the pounded adobe platform of the veranda, her elbows propped upon her knees, her chin supported in cupped hands as she stared at the dusty, sun-baked vista of Rolavi Wells through eyes that saw nothing. A numbness, both physical and mental, seemed to deaden her faculties. Then she roused herself, silencing the sympathetic volubility of the woman with a gesture.

"They've been gone a couple of hours, you say. Send over to the barn quick for the best horse there. Have my saddle put on him. Hurry!"

Without waiting for a reply she moved off toward the little graveyard of Rolavi Wells which lay but a few rods from the mine foreman's house. She stood, dry-eyed, before the new mound among those older ones that marked the resting places of the Langfords. Returning

to the house, she mounted the horse which a Mexican held for her and with a single word of thanks she rode to the Nugget, dismounting and entering its doors for the first time in her life. Standing on the threshold she sized up the occupants.

"You, Slaven!" she said to the huge hulk that reposed in a chair against the wall. "I'll be back in Rolavi Wells one day to see you hung."

Then she mounted and was gone.

For the first mile she eased her horse along to warm him, increased the pace for another mile, then let him out and did not spare him. Jessup's place was a bit out of the direct line to Pueblo Tasao, not much. Her horse was lathered and breathing hard as she rode into the ranch yard. Jessup, his wife and a flock of children, were waiting to meet her.

She slid from the saddle and her knees almost refused to support her weight as her feet touched the ground.

"Saddle a fresh horse for me," she said.

Jessup made a sign to a Mexican boy who had overheard the request and the lad headed for the corral, leading the spent horse upon which she had arrived.

"Where all have you come from, Honey, in such a rush?" Mrs. Jessup inquired.

"Quenemaro," Sarah Lee answered. She seemed scarcely aware of their presence. Her eyes followed the Mexican youth in the corral.

Jessup towered above her, observing her face.

"Quenemaro! Dear, dear. That's close to a hundred miles. What's the trouble, sweetheart, and where are you heading?" Mrs. Jessup asked.

"On a killing spree. Don't ask me now," said Sarah Lee. "Have that boy hurry."

"I'll be going along," Jessup said. "Son, get my belt."

He turned to the corral, tightened the cinches on a horse that stood there loose-saddled, buckled on a gun belt which his small son brought from the house.

"Tell me," he said, as they rode away in the gathering dusk. "So's I'll know what we're heading into."

She told him in disjointed fragments.

"We may not get there ahead of them, but right soon after," was his only comment.

Then, perhaps an hour later, he remarked:

"I've been knowing a lot of that, and surmis-

ing the rest, for a long while now. After that, they'd have swallowed a little outfit like mine whole, but reserved it till last. I haven't talked it any, for fear they'd elect me first. I was figuring to sell out and take my family out of the Sink."

Still later he said, " You make your own play. I'll back it."

A dark knot resolved itself into a group of saddled horses some quarter of a mile from the Castinado hacienda. There were perhaps a dozen animals tethered there.

" They've broke up into several parties and are coming up on all sides of the place at once on foot," Jessup predicted.

They rode straight on. The old Castinado stronghold on the eminence above the village loomed black and forbidding against the sky. Not a light showed from it. It was probable that Hollister had received warning of the attack and had put out all lights, deploying his men in the darkness, Jessup reflected. He pictured them peering from behind the walls of the compound, grimly waiting, while the attacking forces closed in.

Then a voice from immediately in front of the two riders barked a command:

"Hands up! Another step and down goes the pair of you."

The girl and Jessup drew rein.

"I'm Sarah Lee Langford, and I'm going on up this hill," the girl said. "Jessup is with me. Don't try to stop us."

"But, Sarah Lee," the voice expostulated. "There's forty men closing in from all sides. We'll carry this place. Don't you bother."

"I'm going on up," she said. "You stay here. I know what I'm about."

She jumped her horse ahead beside Jessup's. The man called after her, warning her to be cautious. Those within earshot, believing that the daughter of the Langfords had come to lead the assault on the place in person, surged up the hill, expecting to be fired upon from the house at any second.

She called out Hollister's name as she neared the house so that his men would not believe Jessup and herself to be enemies and shoot. There was no answer. They flung from their horses before the veranda, crossed it swiftly and

Jessup threw open the door. Still there was no answer to their calls. Sarah Lee plucked one of Jessup's guns from its holster.

"Strike a light, quick!" she ordered. "Then wake Hollister and bring him to me before those others get over the wall into the compound from behind."

She stood in the doorway as the foremost of those who raced up the hill on foot neared the veranda. Jessup had hastily lighted the big oil lamp in the living room and she stood outlined in the lighted doorway.

"Stop!" she ordered, as the first two men arrived. "I'll kill the first man that sets foot on this veranda, and the next. Stand right where you are!" She repeated this as others arrived on the run, converging upon the lighted doorway. "I'll run this thing from now on," she said.

They stood about just off the veranda, uncomprehending. One or two voiced a question which she neither heard nor answered. Her knees seemed too weak to support her and she extended her left hand to the door casing to steady herself. Jessup's voice boomed throughout the house as he sought to rouse Hollister. At any moment

she expected to hear the sound of fighting from the compound.

The gathering crowd before her became insistent in its demands to know what this meant.

"In a minute I'll tell you," she said. "Stand still."

Then Jessup was standing behind her.

"Not a soul round the place," he announced. "They'd got wind of this and ducked out. It's plum empty."

There came the sound of clattering boots from the compound. The rear door was thrown open and two men sprang into the room, only to lower their guns and stare stupidly at Jessup and the girl. Others crowded in from the compound. The girl turned away from the door.

"All right. You can come in now," she said.

She walked to one end of the long room and stood by a table, resting one hand upon it. Men continued to pour in from both front and rear.

"Now!" said the girl, facing them. "What devil's business are you up to?"

Without waiting for a reply she hurried on:

"But I know! You came as friends of my brother. But you rode sixty miles out of your

way. You could have done your killing at home. It is Coulard and Slaven and the rest of them that's needing to be killed."

Her voice, low at first, became high-pitched from the intensity of her utterance as the words tumbled forth. Many things she told them, and occasionally the men glanced sidewise at the face of some other.

"Hollister!" she exclaimed at last. "Why, it was Hollister who told me just what all this talk meant — for either him or my brother to be killed and the other one get the blame — and urged me to ride out to Quenemaro and warn him just what he'd hear!"

One man uttered a short scornful laugh, but it was immediately silenced as several others turned and gazed long at him as if marking his identity so they would not forget.

"You men want to kill something," she said. "All right. Ever since I can remember some Langford or other has been leading some faction in a fight. I'm the last Langford left. Now I'll lead one myself. You follow me and I'll lead you back to Rolavi and point out several subjects and you can do all the killing you please. I've only

covered a hundred and twenty-odd miles in the saddle to-day. I'm good for another sixty. We'll start now, before this killing frenzy of yours all wears off."

She took a step from the table, but her knees refused longer to support her, and she sank to a chair. She was near the breaking point and knew that she was going to cry. But she still faced them, dry-eyed, and essayed to rise from her seat.

Jessup's big hand reached out and awkwardly patted her head as he faced the men.

"You all clear out," he said simply. "Go quiet."

XX

As Hollister rode into Rolavi Wells at the head of his men, the darkness that had prevailed for the past three hours was lifting, giving way to the rays of the moon that was just swinging above the horizon.

The party split into two groups, leaving their horses some distance from Coulard's and advancing on foot. Farrel led three men to the rear of the Nugget. One man cared for each group of horses. Four others deployed themselves at intervals the length of the street, taking cover in the doorways of the long string of lodging quarters. Hollister held on toward the front entrance of Coulard's with the remaining three.

Judge Sloane, just emerging from the adobe building that served as both office and living quarters and which stood diagonally across the corner from Coulard's, observed the silent advance of this body of men. One after another, men dropped out to take cover in a doorway. Judge

Sloane ducked hastily back within the shelter of his own darkened quarters.

Wharton, from his doorway, observed this movement. Another dim figure was moving toward Sloane's quarters, but as Wharton looked it disappeared quite abruptly. Wharton could not hear the voice that hissed sharply from Sloane's window:

"Slaven! Get under cover. They're on us — Hollister's men!"

He only knew that just as Hollister's men reached the front entrance of the Nugget; some figure had faded into the gloom between Sloane's adobe office and the next building beyond.

Cole Webber sat in Coulard's rear office, the door of which was open. Coulard stood at the far end of the bar where two miners were arguing. Cotton Moss sat at a table engaged in a game of solitaire. The stage company's agent, the blacksmith and the proprietor of the Rolavi Livery, all of whom were nightly patrons, sat along the far wall with several other regulars. The games were unpatronized. Dealers idly practiced their art. The croupier at the roulette layout twirled his wheel and made mental bets

against his own bank to amuse himself. The lookout sat upon his high stool a bit to the right and rear of the croupier. His sawed-off shotgun reposed on the shelflike arm of his perch, from which it had not been lifted in menace for many a day.

Such was the indolent picture upon which Hollister and his men intruded. They filed swiftly inside, each man stepping aside to make room for his fellows. The rear door opened to admit Farrel and Crippen. Within a space of three seconds they were all in the room, and in the next second thereafter things happened simultaneously from all points at once.

Judge Sloane, from his window diagonally across from the Nugget, opened fire with a rifle upon the disappearing back of the last man to enter. The ball tugged at his ear and buried itself in the roulette layout at exactly the same instant that Webber, glancing up from whatever engaged his attention in Coulard's rear office, recognized Slack among those at the door and fired instantly from where he sat, shooting Slack through the shoulder. Even as Slack went down to his knees from the impact of the heavy ball,

Webber leaped to close the office door, but pitched down upon his face as Hollister shot him through the body. His outstretched fingers groped for the door and he flung it shut, sprawling sidewise to get out of line of the heavy slugs that splintered through the door in search of him.

For a space of five seconds many shots crashed as one in the walled-in space. Moss had flung himself sidewise from his chair at the instant he recognized Crippen and Farrel entering the rear door. His first shot sounded simultaneously with those fired by Judge Sloane and Webber. Kneeling and firing beneath the heavy table that sheltered him, he shot Crippen three times through the body. Crippen, standing, could see but little of his assailant, but until he died on his feet he shot steadily back at the few inches of Moss that were visible beneath the table, shattering both knees where they touched the adobe floor. Moss, his support thus undermined, toppled sideways as Crippen died, exposing himself to Farrel, who shot him twice even as Moss, bracing himself in a sitting position with one hand, fired once at Farrel and brought him down.

Coulard, recognizing Hollister even before

Sloane's shot had sounded, dropped to one knee and was shooting round the far corner of the bar, only his gun arm and a third of his face exposed. Clawson and old man Whetzel opened on him at the same instant, the first two balls splintering the corner of the bar within an inch of his head. Coulard fired three consecutive shots, slicing a furrow in Hollister's cheek, breaking Whetzel's arm just below the shoulder and shooting Clawson through the fleshy part of the leg. Hollister, Clawson and Whetzel fired as one, and Coulard, shot twice through the head and with a third ball ranging the length of his forearm, slid out from behind the corner of the bar on to the floor.

The lookout, at first minded to take no part in a brawl that was no business of his, saw his proprietor go into action and knew it was a house affair, so he lifted the sawed-off shotgun from its shelf. Slack, from the kneeling posture to which the shock of Webber's ball had toppled him, observed the move and shot the lookout between the eyes. He toppled forward from his lofty perch, discharging both barrels of the weapon into the pounded adobe floor as he fell.

Webber had regained his feet and darted out the back door of Coulard's office.

"Hands up!" a voice ordered.

Webber died as he had lived, casually, sardonically. He laughed, and shot his opponent dead, then went down shooting steadily back at the flashes of a gun that opened from the gloom and laid him low. None of the participants in this affray were men to waste lead in a moment of crisis. Nearly every shot had found a mark. In less than ten seconds from the time Sloane's rifle had barked, it was over.

For a very brief span the room jarred under the walled-in roar of the guns. Then, suddenly, ears that still throbbed with the concussion were assailed by an equally portentous silence. It seemed that no man even breathed. The sound of a burnt match dropping to the earthen floor would now have crashed discordantly upon taut nerves, so swift was the transition. A heavy pall of powder smoke drifted hazily, acrid and bitter to the nostrils, stinging the eyeballs of those who peered through it. The two miners stood with their backs to the bar, their hands elevated, emulating the example set by the various game-

keepers. The patrons against the wall sat very still.

Then Hollister spoke:

"You all needn't poke your hands in the air, thataway. This ain't any holdup. Can't a man come into town for a frolic without getting himself shot at on sight — just because he's a sheepman? One man shot at Slack's back from outside as we come in the door, and another party opened from that back office and shot him through the shoulder. Another one, that fellow back there," indicating Moss, "killed two men before they'd hardly set foot inside the back door. It must be because sheepmen ain't welcome in town here. That's the only guess I can make. But if we wasn't going to get killed to the last man in cold blood, we was just crowded into doing an odd bit of shooting ourselves by way of self-defence."

No one spoke. Hands were slowly lowered. Men breathed again. Farrel, merely stunned by the last hasty shot fired by Moss, the ball having creased his temple, now rose and looked about him. Blood coursed down Hollister's chin from the rent in his cheek and dripped to the floor.

The croupier lowered his hands and twirled his wheel. He reflected upon the caliber of those who had gone down in the affray, any of them accounted among the deadliest of gun-fighters of his day.

"You all are real apt at self-defence," he commented. "Right at the head of your class."

Hollister looked about him, studying the patrons.

"It seems sheepmen ain't welcome hereabouts," he said. "We'll sift on back home. Any of you boys too bad hurt to make it, riding easy, after patching yourselves up a bit?"

It seemed not.

"Only Crippen, of course, and Morton," one man reported, entering from the rear. "Webber come out and shot Morton. Then I got Webber."

Another man stepped through the front entrance.

"Wharton wants to see you out front," he informed Hollister in an undertone.

Hollister, acting upon this summons, joined Wharton in the shelter of a doorway.

"There's a coot over in that little adobe hut

yonder. A short, fatlike party. It was him that fired first from that window. Then I shelled him back under cover," Wharton informed.

" That will be Sloane, and I want him," Hollister said. " You hold him there. I've got some business in Coulard's office that'll take maybe ten minutes. I'll go in the back way so no one will know I'm inside it. Then I'll come out from the back and circle up to the blank side wall of that 'dobe hut of Judge Sloane's."

He invaded Coulard's office by way of the rear entrance. The door of the safe stood ajar. He ignored the sack of gold and the packets of currency, turning his attention to the sheafs of papers that were pigeonholed in the open-faced compartments. Swiftly, one after another, he thumbed them over. Not one note did he find that was signed by Art Langford and made out to either Coulard or Slaven — no sign of a deed from Langford. Eventually, however, he found a deed, dated upon that day, which conveyed the Bar Z Bell from Slaven to Coulard. This in itself was sufficient evidence of the existence, somewhere, of a deed from Langford to Slaven. This one document he slipped into his pocket. Two

minutes later he stood at the blank-walled side of Sloane's domicile and peered round its corner near the open window from which Sloane had fired.

The sound of wheezy breathing reached his ears.

" Come on out, Sloane," he ordered.

The leaky breathing ended in a husky exhalation, but there was no other reply.

" Sloane, you can either come on out this second or I'll order this joint riddled and have done with it," Hollister announced. " Time is short. Take your choice."

" What do you want with me? " Sloane protested weakly.

" Nothing — only to talk with you," said Hollister. " Come on out. No one is going to hurt you."

Sloane came forth hesitantly, like some apprehensive rodent emerging from its burrow.

" Now," said Hollister, when he had moved Sloane into a moonlit space, " where's Slaven? "

" He was outside here, just as you all went into Coulard's door. He made off somewheres."

" Where would he go? " Hollister demanded.

Judge Sloane expressed his inability to hazard a guess, there were so many places to go.

"Take me to the courthouse," Hollister ordered. "There's something I want to see."

Sloane led the way and in a very few minutes, at Hollister's insistence, he had opened the new books in the Register of Deeds' office and exhibited a fresh entry, recording a deed that conveyed the Bar Z Bell from Langford to Slaven.

"Now, Sloane, you don't want to hang, but that's a contingency that's creeping up on you. Coulard, Webber and Moss are no more. Slaven is hiding out somewheres and we'll soon smoke him out. There's some things I want to know. Where is the deed from Langford to Slaven and the notes or whatever other paper that's supposed to show why he parted with the Bar Z Bell?" As he spoke, he was cutting the page containing the entry from the book. He folded it and placed it with the other paper in his pocket. "I aim to collect that assortment and turn them over to Langford."

"Langford!" Sloane blurted.

His voice was husky and he stared glassily at his interlocutor.

"Who else?" Hollister returned.

"Langford's dead," Sloane stated hoarsely. "He was buried this morning."

He broke off, backing hastily away from Hollister as that individual blazed forth:

"What did he die of? Now you speak right out in meeting and spill this whole thing. You tell me the truth and you get off free. Answer every question straight out. Don't stop and study!"

Judge Sloane was not of the same stern fiber that had characterized his erstwhile associates. Under Hollister's questioning, he spoke in an effort to save his skin at the expense of anything else whatsoever.

Occasionally he lied, plausibly, but not convincingly, and each time Hollister cut him short and extracted the truth. For the first time Hollister learned of the event of the preceding night. Only an hour before he had chuckled as he pictured Langford's chagrin when he marshalled his men to the capture of the deserted stronghold on the hill.

"It was when the girl said what she did that Coulard got apprehensive and urged Slaven to

lay low until they found out what sort of temper the boys was in when they come back. If she'd tell them anything that put 'em in a nasty frame o' mind, Slaven had better stay out of these parts for a spell till folks sort of forgot," Sloane concluded.

This was the first that Hollister had heard to the effect that Sarah Lee had returned. Eventually, under Hollister's swift ruthless interrogation, Sloane, perspiring profusely, his hands working spasmodically, protested that Coulard and Slavin did not confide many details to him, a statement in which Hollister placed full credence. Sloane asserted that most of his surmises came from piecing together chance remarks, since Slaven, Webber and Coulard, while not confiding in him, nevertheless were prone to be somewhat unguarded in their utterances when in his presence. Just what the girl had meant, just how much she knew, where she was headed and with what purpose in mind, were necessarily matters for disquieting conjecture; and Sloane had heard some discussion of it between the others. Sand Crawl had been mentioned as a likely spot for some purpose, also, and the Mescalano Trail.

Later, toward nightfall, he had seen Slaven filling two skin water bags, but he had failed to leave town before Hollister's men arrived. That, Sloane protested, was all that he was able to relate.

Hollister, convinced of the relative truth of this contention, departed with Sloane and headed back for the Nugget.

" Sloane," he said, " I'm as good as my word. It was Slaven, not you, that shot at Slack's back from across the corner, as far as we're concerned, and as long as you're convinced that we acted only in self-defence throughout. You swear to that if it ever comes up. You're in the clear for just as long as you stay on the right side of the road. I'll put you in charge of the town to set a guard on Coulard's office and close the safe right while I'm watching you. When the boys get back from my place, you give it to them straight. You'll be sitting here, an exponent of law and order, when the law comes in, which will be right sudden. I've sent to Fort Ciradua for intervention now."

These arrangements completed, he inquired after such of his men as were hurt. Finding the

injuries mostly superficial, none of them dangerous, he drew Whetzel aside.

"You take charge and help to ease the boys back out home. You can't travel fast with some that's shot pretty severe. Head east first, and well into Spanish Acres before turning south, so you won't meet that crew coming back. I'm going out after Slaven. When you get back, bring Wharton and come to Sand Crawl."

Ten minutes thereafter he rode out of Rolavi Wells on a fresh horse which he had secured at the barn, leaving his own tired animal to be led home by one of his men. It would, he knew, be a suicidal undertaking to follow Slaven with the hope of overtaking him. Slaven, certain to discover the fact that he was followed, would simply drop behind some convenient ridge and bushwhack his pursuer.

Hollister headed almost due south. By holding this course clear to the canyon of the Rio Tasao he would just miss the western extremity of Sand Crawl. Then, skirting its rims to the east, he would come out at the head of the Mescalano Trail. Far better that he should be waiting for Slaven than to find Slaven waiting for

him, he reflected. It lacked an hour of midnight, but an eighty-mile ride lay ahead. Hour after hour he held on at a moderate gait that covered the miles, but exerted not too great a strain on the horse.

Eventually the animal showed a tendency to slacken its gait, yet exhibited no symptom of excessive fatigue. Hollister looked at his watch. It showed four o'clock.

"We're way off ahead of him by now. He won't be riding hard, but saving his horse," Hollister surmised. "I'll save you up a bit too."

He slackened the gait to a shuffling trot.

"If only I was riding through Spanish Acres, now, instead of off west here, I could change mounts every hour at some Tasao hogan."

A crimson streak appeared in the east, then gray dawn sifted across the desert. Mustangs spurted ahead of him. Then a band of horses, showing no great fear, galloped a short distance and wheeled to face him.

"A bunch of broke horses," he said. "I wonder, now, if you've got one good spurt left in you, so's I could maybe dab my twine on to one of those chaps."

He headed for the horses and they whirled and fled, one of them kicking up its heels in an excess of spirits. He pulled in behind them, unbuckling his rope strap. After one short spurt the horses settled down to a steady gait, evidencing no very frantic desire to outdistance him. The good mount beneath him let out another lap of speed and drew up close on their heels. Hollister singled out a big bay gelding, swung his loop as his horse darted forward, made his cast and watched the noose settle squarely about the neck of the gelding. Five minutes later he was whirling across the country on an animal that was anxious to go.

"Won't do any harm to travel," Hollister concluded. "Slaven might have done the same thing, and caught up a fresh horse on the range somewhere."

When the sun was three hours high he reached the head of the Mescalano Trail where it pitched down into the canyon of the Rio Tasao.

XXI

The crest of the slight ridge afforded an excellent view of the country just ahead. The landscape, for a hundred yards in the foreground, was excessively choppy. Some little brush, dwarfed and straggling, had obtained a precarious root hold and was struggling valiantly for continued existence. An occasional yucca reared its head. It was from between the sheltering, spear-pointed tufts of two of these plants that Hollister peered. The single tall flower stalk of each plant, now dried and dead since the blooming season had passed, towered high above him. Beyond the hundred-yard expanse of sparsely vegetated country there commenced the desolate wastes of shifting sands.

Hollister had watched it for two hours, occasionally glancing either way along the rims of the canyon, since it was possible that Slaven, too, would elect to skirt Sand Crawl rather than to cross it. He had exerted every effort to remain awake, but drowsiness returned at the instant

when he imagined that he had shaken it off. The strain and the long night of hard riding had told. The glare of the sun on the white sand tired his eyes, but whenever he would rest them by closing them for a few seconds, he could open them again only with difficulty. He tried splashing a little water from his canteen across his face. This sufficed but for a space of seconds. He turned and looked at his horse. The animal grazed on a bench under the first rim of the canyon near a tiny spring. Hollister descended to it and refilled his canteen, a small affair holding but little over a pint. Another hour had passed. He tried the expedient of closing his eyes while he counted ten, then opening them, but after starting the counting he was startled to wakefulness by the rattle of the dried flower stalks above his head, conscious that he had been asleep, but not knowing how long a period had elapsed meanwhile, probably but a few seconds. He rose and paced about. Another hour passed. The wound on his cheek was drying, paining him considerably, but not with sufficient intensity to counteract the drowsiness that was claiming him for its own. The breeze had freshened, rattling the dry flower

stalks and lashing the bayonet leaves of the tufted yuccas, and he was forced to pull his hat on more firmly to avoid having it plucked from his head. He knew that he was going to sleep and that Slaven would find him here.

But, after all, would Slaven find him here, he asked himself suddenly? It had been his surmise, formed from what Sloane had told him, that Slaven would wait at this spring at the head of the Mescalano Trail until word from Coulard should reach him, then leave the country for a period or return to Rolavi forthwith, according to whether the tidings be good or bad. But Slaven had left Rolavi Wells after hearing the brief spurt of firing, knowing that Hollister had surprised Coulard and was in charge of the town, so he would be assured that his absence from these parts was imperative. Why, then, should he choose the longest and hardest route to safety instead of following the shortest and easiest? Any time during the night Slaven could have turned to the west, covered the intervening few miles to Solado Arroya, effecting a crossing and disappeared in the breaks. That, Hollister reflected, was exactly what he would have done

had he left Rolavi Wells under circumstances similar to those under which Slaven had departed. Then, too, perhaps his idea that the capture of Slaven was paramount was a trifle exaggerated in view of those same altered conditions. Slaven was outlawed, a certain page in the records destroyed; the citizenry of the Rolavi Sink was now, or soon would be, apprised of facts contrary to what had been popularly believed in the past. In view of these altered conditions would any papers in Slaven's possession, or which he had safely hidden away, seriously affect Sarah Lee's title to the Bar Z Bell in the future? Hollister's brain, reeling from drowsiness, could not decipher it all. One thing he knew with exceeding clarity, that Slaven was not coming this way. It was now an hour past noon, and if Slaven were heading for the Mescalano Trail he should have reached it long since.

In this last conclusion he failed to take into consideration the fact that Slaven was a creature devoid of imagination. He could, of course, guess with fair accuracy the outcome of the affray in Rolavi Wells, but guessing was not in his line. Things might yet be well, and since he had been

instructed to wait for word from Coulard, he would wait until assured that no word was forthcoming.

The wind was increasing in violence as Hollister tightened his cinches, watered his horse and headed out into Sand Crawl. Fine sand, under the impetus of the wind, curled and eddied round the horse's hoofs. Stray puffs, struck from ridges, hurtled down upon Hollister, stinging his face. The gale gathered velocity and the air was filled with flying particles. Hollister saw dark low-hanging clouds which he knew to be wind-flung sand billowing across the foreground. Then a Rolavi sandstorm swept down in all its accumulated intensity.

The atmosphere was so densely packed with hurtling sand as to render breathing almost impossible. The kerchief that was ever knotted about Hollister's throat, worn for just such emergencies, he now reversed, pulling it well up beneath his eyes. He could breathe in labored fashion now, but his lungs ached. The stinging particles swept against him with redoubled force, filling his pockets, even filtering into his shirt.

"Hell's fury!" he muttered. "This here would sandpaper the hide off'n a lizard."

He had covered several miles before the storm struck, so there was small use to return as there was no shelter that way unless he could reach the rims of the canyon. Neither himself nor the horse could endure through any considerable distance in such going, so they must hold on until reaching some spot that afforded a measure of shelter. He gave the horse its head and the animal turned down wind. After what seemed an interminable period Hollister was conscious that locomotion had ceased. Gently he touched the horse with his spur. The animal fidgeted uneasily but declined to move. Hollister was aware of the fact that the violence of the storm had abated somewhat, even though his ears were assailed by the hissing shriek of the sand-laden gale, and he divined that the horse had made its way unerringly to shelter. They were on the downwind side of a twenty-foot wall of hard sand, and the horse was backed up to the bank, its rump almost touching. Just to the right, a matter of perhaps a dozen feet, the sand-freighted wind screeched past down the course of an open

bottom. The curling back lash eddied sand into Hollister's retreat and from the bank above it descended in a steady downpour, but with no particular violence.

Lassitude overcame him again. He dismounted and sat on the sand, his head resting on his arms as he folded them across his knees. Breathing was easier that way. Presently he was roused by a sense of suffocation. He had slept until he was half covered with sand, but he shook himself free and sat down again upon this new and higher surface. He wondered, in case this should keep up, if the floor of this little cut between two sand walls would not soon attain to the same level as the sheltering banks, one rising as the other receded. He glanced sidewise at what appeared to be a river of sand, running at flood tide a dozen feet to his right. It shrieked on its way, so dense that he could not see into it. Then he slept again. This process was repeated three times.

Eventually, upon opening his eyes, he was aware that the fury of the blow had abated. The river of sand to his right was not so dense as formerly. It was carrying only the finer par-

ticles now. He felt somewhat refreshed, at least was not suffering acutely for sleep, but his eyelids seemed worn away. They smarted abominably; and his lips were scorched. Twice during the blow he had moistened his lips, and he now resorted to the canteen once more, shaking it to ascertain how much of the precious fluid remained. It seemed to be almost empty. The draw to the right now held nothing more than an eddying dust cloud. He could even see out into it and observe a dark object some twenty yards away. He regarded it curiously, divining that the gale, shrieking down this open bottom, had scoured out a still deeper channel, uncovering this object. It slanted like a leaning snag, half erect; and it took on the semblance of a scarecrow fashioned in human form. Then, quite suddenly, he knew that the object was the mummified remains of a human being resurrected by the wind.

Sheltered by a cut-bank draw similar to Hollister's but opening into the little bottom on the far side and perhaps twenty yards farther along, another man viewed this uncanny spectacle of a dead man's reappearance. This man grinned, extracted his two small skin water bags from the

sand, plucked forth his saddle and other equipment and announced to the mummy:

"Well, I put you there, but the wind brung you back."

Slaven had ridden slowly, saving his horse. An hour before daylight he had permitted the animal to graze. Then he had ridden into Sand Crawl from the north when the sun was two hours high, electing to spend the day there and intending to emerge with nightfall to water and feed his horse, then return for yet another day. There might be word from Coulard. In any event he had water and there was food in his saddle bags. Why should he hurry? His horse had strayed away during the blow, but it would have headed down wind with the storm, and, bridled as it was, even though unsaddled, it would not have traveled far with trailing ribbons. Before setting forth in search of it he advanced some twenty feet toward the mummy that protruded from the sand.

At that moment a conviction formed in Hollister's mind.

"John Gillfoyle!" he exclaimed, and rose to his feet.

As he arrived at the edge of his pocket he saw Slaven. Both men reached for their guns. Hollister's holster was packed full of sand and his weapon refused to clear. He freed it with a violent wrench but Slaven's gun spoke first. There was a numbing shock in Hollister's leg midway between the hip and the knee. It let him down, but he fired at Slaven as he fell.

The little dyke of sand across the mouth of the cut, eddied there by the gale that had raced down the bottoms, concealed him from Slaven, whose position was on a lower surface. Hollister knew that one thing was inevitable. Slaven would circle to the bank above and have him at his mercy, for he himself could not maneuver with one leg out of commission. Far better that he should have it out now, while he could still sight Slaven in the open bottom and expose only his own head as a target. Acting on this impulse he lifted his guns even with his eye and peered over the little sand dyke. Just as he made out Slaven's form, prone in the sand, a million pinwheels exploded in his brain and the light went out.

Out in the bottom, where Hollister's first and

only shot had dropped him, Slaven watched that little dyke. His eyes were wavering and he knew that within a very short space of time they would glaze over and never see again. But he wanted to get Hollister first. He endeavored to crawl toward the mouth of the cut, but could not move his great frame an inch. His head he could move with an effort, and his forearms. Then a thought came to him. Hollister, too, was unhorsed and with a broken leg. Slaven fixed his eyes on the water bags and managed with some effort to line his gun on one of them just where it met the sand. It was suddenly deflated as the water spurted through the gash. The jar of the gun tore it from the weak clasp of his fingers. He retrieved it with the last of his strength and deflated the remaining water bag.

He peered at the mummy, which seemed to grin mockingly. Slaven grinned too.

"Here's the three of us," he said.

Then he died.

For what seemed an eternity Hollister had been listening to several men hammering on sheet metal and every stroke hurt his head. He wished that they would desist. Then a thunderous re-

port caused him to open his eyes. His head throbbed most terribly. After an interval there was a second report which he knew for a gunshot. Slaven had just punctured the second water bag.

Slaven's shot had struck Hollister's gun, knocking the weapon sidewise against his skull. All told, he had been in a dazed, semiconscious state for less than five minutes. The report cleared his head as his predicament became clear to him. He steadied himself and tried to plan what steps to take. He peered over the little dyke of sand. Slaven lay sprawled at full length, his gun in the sand a foot from his fingers. Was this a ruse to draw him forth? His own gun was jammed from the shot that had struck it. He watched, and at last he knew that life had fled from the great hulk that sprawled there, facing John Gillfoyle's mummy.

Hollister sought to catch his horse, but the animal snorted and jumped away from this thing that crawled toward him. The man endeavored to stand upright and hop on one foot, but the loose yielding sand betrayed him, and the horse, already frightened, refused to permit his close

approach. On a dozen occasions the animal stepped on the trailing reins, jerking his mouth severely.

Hollister gave over the effort and crawled back to Slaven's equipment in the hope of finding water. He found only the deflated water bags and searched in the saddle pockets for a canteen. Instead he found food, a great roll of currency and a packet of papers that suddenly recalled the original object that had led him into his present predicament.

There were many notes, the amounts large, some made by Langford to Slaven, some made out to Coulard and endorsed over to Slaven. The deed from Langford to Slaven was among the lot and a number of contracts, agreements and memoranda, all apparently signed by the same hand. Hollister did not peruse them. He was too exhausted to be particularly interested in the substance of them so he merely touched a match to the lot and added the two papers in his own pocket, watching them burn to an ash.

Then fighting off his growing lethargy, he drained the water bags of what few drops remained in their folds, took Slaven's rifle, which

he endeavored to use as a crutch, and set forth after his horse. He found the animal on the far side of the cut which had sheltered them. The horse had quieted, and by using the rifle butt downward, so that it would not sink too far into the yielding sand, he achieved a wabbling but upright style of locomotion that, while not to the animal's liking, still failed to alarm it greatly.

Every movement was sheer agony to Hollister, but he managed to cover the last ten feet with surprising steadiness, speaking quietly to the horse, soothing it. Eventually he grasped a rein. The horse whirled round, facing him, blowing suspiciously, and for a space refused to permit him to attain its side. He spoke to it, stroking its neck and twining one hand in its mane. His other hand sought the horn and at last he swung himself to the saddle.

His senses were staggering and he lunged dizzily as he headed the animal north toward Pueblo Tasao.

"Keep your head!" he kept repeating to himself. "Once you let yourself flop out o' this saddle an' it's your meat house. Don't forget that. You'll be down for good. Keep that in

mind. It's only fifteen miles to Pueblo Tasao and twelve to the edge of Sand Crawl. Once out of this sand I can touch off a brush fire and some one will maybe come to see what it means."

A dozen times he swayed dangerously and the horse side-stepped nervously. The blood that oozed from his leg covered his hands, already crusted with blood and sand, and was smeared on the pommel.

"Only ten miles now — seven to the edge of this sand," he presently estimated. "Steady yourself!"

Vaguely, he knew that he could not expect help within forty-eight hours or thereabouts. He had instructed Whetzel to come here after seeing the men safely home. But the party would cover that sixty miles to Pueblo Tasao slowly, its gait regulated by the pace that the most badly wounded man in the lot could maintain with safety and comparative ease.

Something hammered in his brain. His leg seemed immersed in molten lead. Parched lips craved water, but the water was gone. He came to suddenly, swaying drunkenly in the saddle.

"It's just up to you, now!" he told himself.

"Down once — down forever. Steady, old man!"

But instead he lurched forward onto the pommel. The horse snorted and swerved away from this thing that clutched at its neck.

Hollister opened his eyes and spat sand from his mouth.

"Now you've gone and done it," he accused himself. "There couldn't have been but a few more miles to travel to get out of this sand."

There was still an hour of daylight. A part of that time he rested. Then he set forth and crawled toward Pueblo Tasao. At the end of a few yards he was exhausted and pain-racked and he sprawled flat in the sand. Presently he made a fresh start. Night shut down and he still held on.

Everything seemed far in the past — all of his former ambitions. What did Coulard and Slaven and Spanish Acres matter? It seemed odd that he should ever have cared about such trivial issues. Just one thing that did matter stood out. He wanted to see Sarah Lee Langford. There had always been so many things that he had promised himself he would tell her at their very

next meeting. Then, invariably, they had talked of other things, leaving most of what he had in mind unsaid. It was this thought that drove his tortured frame onward. He must, somehow, make his way to Sarah Lee Langford.

The moon came up, its wan radiance rousing him from stupor, and he writhed ahead for a few yards, halted, panting, and hitched onward again. There was something, he could not remember quite what, that he just must tell Sarah Lee. The forward hitches became shorter and less frequent. Presently he announced:

"Sarah Lee, I'm damned if I believe I can make it. You'll have to come to me." Then he lay very still in the sand.

And at that very moment Sarah Lee was coming, riding toward Sand Crawl like some creature gone mad.

Having slept until high noon from sheer exhaustion, she had spent the balance of the day in a state of lethargy. Nothing seemed to matter. Not until the moon rose did she leave the house, saddle her horse and ride from the compound. She had just passed Pueblo Tasao when she noted, indifferently, the actions of a horse just

ahead of her. Its manner of holding its head to one side, flinging it occasionally, was to avoid stepping on trailing reins, she knew, having seen many a horse perform in similar fashion. It was saddled. Some one, then, had been left afoot. It was making for water and nickered eagerly as she rode up.

The saddle was smeared with great dark splotches, crusted with sand, and she recoiled as she realized that these were blood stains. She found herself gazing fixedly at a saddle bag. It was of Indian manufacture and the design stood out in the bright moonlight. There was but one such pair of saddle bags in existence. The Tasao women had made a set for Hollister, the design being emblematic of a warbonnet sunrise in token of the fact that Hollister was the benefactor of the tribe of Tasao.

Her lethargy had departed. The thought that nothing in life was worth while, having weighed down her spirit, was swiftly superseded by the most acute knowledge that one thing mattered more to her than all that had gone before.

She came of the stock that rises to face a crisis instead of wilting when faced by one. She

roused the village in the space of one minute, reining in her horse before Sutanak's abode.

"Quick!" she ordered the aged chieftain. "Hollister has been hurt — in Sand Crawl, I think, for there's sand mixed with the blood in his saddle." To a squaw she said, "Get me a water bag." Then, to Sutanak, "Send out your best trackers to follow the back track of the horse out there that wears Hollister's saddle, others to scour Sand Crawl from one end to the other!"

Then she took the water bag from the squaw and fled into the moonlit desert, urging her horse at top speed. One thing she knew. The horse had been heading for water, and when she had sighted him he had been traveling northeast. The water nearest to the point at which he had emerged from Sand Crawl had been the Valley of Springs. Otherwise he would have headed for Claypole Seeps, which lay some six miles to the west. Acting upon this surmise she laid her course to strike somewhat southwest of Pueblo Tasao.

When she reached the edge of the sands she held straight into the shifting wastes. The Tasaos, she knew, were fanning out to cover it

over a ten-mile front. She lifted her voice and strained to catch an answer, then forged on. Once a Tasao rode into her field of vision as he topped out on a sandhill in the white moonlight. She knew that others were riding off to the east and to the west, a score of them. They would find him. After perhaps four miles of such traveling she saw it — a crazy, writhing trail where some creature had dragged its stricken body along in the sand. She spurred her horse along it for a hundred yards before being assailed by the fact that the man would be crawling north, not south, and she wheeled her horse and retraced her way.

Even as she turned, a Tasao, his keen eyes having detected the trail from an adjacent ridge, rode down and joined her. Some heavy ache in her breast seemed to choke and stifle her, shutting off her breath as she read the significance of the tortured creeping that had resulted in such a trail as this. And now she was paralleling her own previous course. Perhaps she had missed him by but a few feet. The Tasao, reading the tale of every halt and every onward struggle, made but one comment:

" One leg no good. He creep. Soon find."

And after a quarter of a mile they found him. The girl flung from her saddle and knelt beside the prone figure, forcing a few drops of water between the swollen lips, bathing his face; and she made little moaning sounds as she worked, imploring him to speak to her.

The Tasao knew that others had by this time picked up the trail of the horse and were backtracking him to the point where Hollister had left the saddle. Others would be near. He lifted his voice in a signal. Others answered.

" Me do," he said, kneeling beside the girl and taking over her task. He felt the pulse to make sure that the heart was still beating, listened to the quality of the breathing, expertly prying open the mouth and trickling into it a small quantity of water. He rested his fingers lightly on the throat to detect the slight muscular contraction that would announce that the few drops had been automatically swallowed. After a time he desisted and bathed the temples and forehead, then inserted another small portion of water between the lips.

Another Tasao rode up on their trail, then an-

other. A third skittered down over a loose sand bank and joined them. And all the while the girl knelt there, caressing the upturned face, whispering to him as if she would love him back to life. He stirred and moaned. The Tasao gave him more water. A new arrival inserted a few drops of some bitter but invigorating liquid between his teeth. He moved his hands feebly, tried to lift his head, gulped water greedily until it was removed. After a moment he tried to speak, but the words were so faint that they could not be understood.

The girl suddenly pressed her own fresh lips upon his swollen ones.

"Come back to me, Stan," she whispered. "Come back to me and tell me you love me."

For a space he was very quiet.

Then, quite distinctly, he said, "I was trying to get back. That's what I was wanting to tell you."

XXII

They sat on the veranda of the old Castinado ranch house as the sun swung low in the west.

"It's somewhat different down there from what it was when we first viewed it from here together, isn't it, little girl?" he asked, pointing down to the village. "It was a real bleak prospect those days."

She nodded, resting a hand on his arm, and they sat in silence, looking down into the village. Pueblo Tasao was a scene of teeming activity. Squaws, garbed in their most gaudy blankets and finery, chattered volubly as they moved about. Children shouted and a hundred dogs added their canine vociferations to the uproar. The flat roofs of the houses were piled high with dried corn and squashes of various sizes, colors and designs. Strings of dried meat were everywhere in evidence and the houses were adorned by a thousand festoons of red peppers.

"We mapped that scene out between us,

Honey," he said. "And now there it lays, just as we'd pictured it. Right soon now we'll have this whole country flooded with sheep. Our annual wool clip will call for enough freight wagons to haul it so's it'll look like an old-time bull train crawlin' over the Rolavi Pass. The railroad will be into Quenemaro, come spring, and before long we'll be shipping choice lambs by the trainload. And one little girl has got three-hundred-odd adoring retainers, just like she'd dreamed of — three hundred Tasaos, and the odd one is me."

She transferred herself to his knee. The tawny buildings of Pueblo Tasao seemed to absorb a roseate tinge from the crimson flame of the sunset. But the commotion, instead of subsiding, seemed to increase. Big fires flared up and the villagers clustered around them, a weaving, chattering throng of kaleidoscopic coloring.

"This is one big fiesta," he said.

The girl's eyes were bright as she answered.

"Yes; an anniversary. It was just seven years ago to-day that Porter exiled them and just one year ago that you brought them back."

The babble in the village had reached a high

pitch of intensity. Then, as the sun disappeared, the sounds fell away. Dead silence ensued.

"What now?" Hollister asked.

A new sound invaded the night, a low weird chant that rose and fell, swelled and receded. Through it all the skin drums throbbed with maddening, monotonous regularity, yet chiming with the whole so as to weave it into a haunting barbaric rhythm.

The arm round Hollister's neck tightened.

Up in the desert hills above the Valley of Springs the priests of Tasao were lifting the curse.

THE END